

WANG
THE
NINTH

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WANG THE NINTH

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Wang the Ninth. The Story of a Chinese Boy

WANG THE NINTH

THE STORY OF A CHINESE
BOY

BY

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[Simpson, Bertram Lenox



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PREFACE

This book is a partial explanation of the phenomenon of China which seems so strange when curtly dealt with in the daily press.

It has quality of being true and should therefore be known.

Peking, July, 1919

WANG THE NINTH

WANG THE NINTH

CHAPTER I

WANG the Ninth was born a few years before the end of the nineteenth century in a village called prosaically in the vernacular Ten Li Hamlet because it lay ten *li* or Chinese miles from the great imperial highway. He was the eighth child; that was why, according to immemorial custom, he was called the Ninth, since the numeral eight added to his patronymic signified that opprobrious epithet term "tortoise," a nickname which no Chinese could survive. When he was little more than three and scarcely weaned (for the children of this land are suckled until they can run) he was unceremoniously put on a creaking wheelbarrow and trundled off into the unknown.

This inconsequential *hegira* was the beginning of his great adventures,—and was the natural aftermath of a curiously swift tragedy in an environment saturated with inaction.

Famine had suddenly descended on Ten Li Hamlet, and his brothers and sisters, having been leased or sold one after another to neighbours (you can use whichever expression you like), he and his father had become the last survivors in a disrupted family. For his mother, too, had tired of privation. She had sat ominously quiet for one whole week and had then slipped away with a travelling blacksmith, who had been working for a season not fifty feet from the family home of mud-bricks and who disappeared as he had come — like a wraith in the night.

It was this which had been the last straw for the father — not the hunger. For, he, too, was a blacksmith by trade. Added to the shame in his bosom for the beggarly condition to which he had been reduced, there had come a volcanic outburst of hurt professional pride. He was totally unable to reconcile himself to the idea that he had been abandoned in favour of another such as he — and for no better reason that there was want in the land. For there was always want; never could he remember a time when the people were not a-hungering, marching through

the country in ragged bands, and spreading dismay wherever they camped.

So one dawn he had sullenly dragged out two baskets, put his last child into one, thrown on top of him some spare clothing, placed his few pots and pans and the implements of his trade (including the unwieldy bellows) in the other, and had marched down the rutted village road shouting curses on every one and declaring that he was shaking the dust of the poverty-stricken place for ever off his feet.

Thus had he gone angrily and vigorously, full of resolution, until he had covered the ten *li* which separated the village from the great highway. Then, when he had seen the broad road leading to the capital, and the carts and the travellers in their handsome clothing, and the long camel-trains with their rich loads of merchandise, a sense of unfamiliarity and loneliness had suddenly overwhelmed him, and he had sat down and wept loudly and unrestrainedly in the manner all Chinese will do.

Nobody had minded his weeping — not even the child in the basket who continued to sleep calmly and impassively, its pinched face turned

in the direction of Heaven. Why indeed should any one mind? As far as the eye could reach there was nothing but brown country — the great Northern plains stretched into infinity and looked upon this evanescent emotion much as the Sphinx surveys the shifting desert sands. A little while you may weep, a little while you may laugh, they seemed to say; then the great silence which covers us all. . . .

So presently the man had stopped and become angry once more. He rose to his feet, tightened his cord belt, and smearing the tears from his seamed face, surveyed the world indifferently. Somehow he would discover a brighter future.

In the basket the child lay in peace. The rising sun pushed golden fingers through the bamboo-work as if to caress its innocence. The father watched with eyes which saw and yet did not see; for he was too simple to know more than that a child is a great blessing, a jewel, because it is of one's flesh and a kind of indefinite prolongation of one's endeavours to conquer the devil. Disaster had been for him like a huge river in spate which had rushed down on him and

left him marooned on a tiny rocking island in the very centre. Now he saw a causeway mysteriously growing out of these dread waters: and in his vague fancies he associated this with the presence of his child.

Presently as he sat gazing there was a thin cry. The little legs kicked with vigour, and the arms with their clenched fists sought to throw off the clothing.

"*Ba-ba*," wailed the eighth child who was called the Ninth, now thoroughly awake. "I am hungry. Give me to eat."

"Wait," said the father roughly yet kindly, brought back from his dreams. "Soon you shall eat."

He conjured up from the bottom of the other basket a big bowl half full of a sort of porridge made from little millet, which was cold and distasteful but which was all that he had. It was the work of a few minutes to light the tiny portable whiteclay stove which he had included in his salvage and which even the poorest in the land always possess. Soon his cooking was done and the child was eating and had become content.

"*Ba-ba*," it lisped again, struggling to get up.
"Where do we go?"

"To the city," grumbled the father, beginning to pack up again. "To the city. Stay quiet. We have far to go."

Already he was off, trundling the wheelbarrow and still eating as he walked. The sun rose higher and higher and perspiration beaded his forehead, but now there was no question of turning back. He was following the mysterious causeway which led to his destiny. On and on he tramped, pushing the creaking wheelbarrow through the chasm of space and sometimes exchanging remarks with the passing muleteers and camel-drivers. Traffic was growing heavier as the city was approached and a veil of dust hung in the air. The highway was strung across the plain like a great frayed rope, which sometimes tightened to a rigid straight line, and sometimes was all knots and twists invented to dismay those who were weary and ill at ease.

In the middle of the day the man lay down and slept under a tree; but ere two hours had passed he was up again and pressing on.

The sun flared out; the stars twinkled brightly

in the skies; and still he did not stop. Hardy as only a peasantry can be who know no comforts, he pressed on tirelessly — determined to reach his objective. The creaking wheel was a veritable lullaby to the child who slept as peacefully as if in its mother's arms, hardly stirring in spite of the bumping, always stretched motionless on its little back.

On and on in the darkness, one hour, two hours, three hours, four. Then at last in the middle of the night, when full forty miles had been covered, a low blaze of lights and the shadow of a great city-wall.

The man stopped abruptly and the jerk woke up the child.

"*Ba-ba*," came the inevitable cry.

He bent over it.

"The city," he exclaimed in his rude, guttural voice, "would you see the city?"

He picked up his son and holding him tightly in his arms, pointed with one finger.

"There, you see . . . the lights and the city-wall. Beyond there is a great gate through which one passes but which is now closed."

The child no longer fretted: it was staring

silently, drinking in everything as if its very life depended upon strict attention. The father felt its little body taut under the ragged blue clothes. Some new impulse possessed it. It leaned towards the city, as if a mysterious force were pulling.

“Well, what do you say?” inquired the father at last, feeling the need for a little talk.

“It is good,” said the child very gravely, as only a very old nation can speak. “It is good,” it repeated, nodding its head after the manner of its elders — “We shall find food.”

Then it sank back content on the straw in the basket, and the father seizing the handles of the wheelbarrow pushed clumsily on.

CHAPTER II

IN the morning the unaccustomed roar and noise of the city gate woke up the sleeping child. No comforting father's voice, however, answered its first stirrings and cries; so after a while the philosophic instinct of the race asserted itself and the boy lay quiet, his astonished eyes taking in everything around him.

In the small bare room there was no living thing save a cat of nondescript colour sitting on a box and licking its paws. The broken paper depending from the lattice-work of the windows, however, flapped to and fro cheerfully and briskly; and the rising sun which was peeping through the gaps in the paper seemed ready to invade the whole room. In one corner were the two baskets and the litter of blacksmith's tools which had travelled so far. Close by was a huge primitive musket and a belt stuffed full of the formidable cartridges of a forgotten period. But the wheelbarrow had vanished and so had the father.

Staring blankly at all this — particularly at the colossal firearm — the child finally half-rolled and half-tumbled to the earthen floor from the low *k'ang* on which it had been put to sleep the night before and began tottering towards the door.

This it managed to open. Then very fearfully it peeped out as if it had opened a veritable Pandora's box.

Instead of trouble, however, the child saw outside a bare waste, and beyond many people and many carts passing endlessly along a raised roadway on which were also posted all sorts of vendors loudly calling their wares. The rumble and clatter of the carts, and the cries of the vendors never ceased: they seemed a veritable brook of life which went on for ever. Enchanted by this animation little Wang remained stockstill, wondering what would happen next. Curiosity consumed him: he observed every detail with powers of observation only given to the exceptional. There was nothing that escaped his quick, tireless black eyes. What a wonderful world he had been brought to!

Presently an old man carrying a portable

kitchen on a pole stopped quite close by; and depositing his paraphernalia started advertising what he had for sale in a thin raucous voice, putting one finger into an ear as he called so as to sense the quality of his tune from the vibrations. Children and women came slowly out of neighbouring houses; then, after a pause, one or two decided to eat and edged up to the old man with money in their hands.

Little Wang, nothing loth, cautiously joined them. He was so small that he stood there for a long time totally unobserved, looking at each disappearing mouthful with envious eyes, and wondering what he should do to be fed like these lucky ones. Presently the old man, having finished his work, turned to him.

"And you?" he inquired in a matter-of-fact way, treating the child as if he were a grown-up.

"I, too, am hungry," announced little Wang gravely.

At this everybody laughed spontaneously as if something very witty had been said; but the child only stood there frowning, showing traces of the resolute character which so quickly developed by not flinching at an inch.

“You are hungry!” echoed the old man quizzically, “well, well — that is as it should be. When one is small it is always so: only with age does the appetite lessen. And where is the money your mother gave you that I may feed you?”

Little Wang shook his head.

“I have no money and no mother,” he replied. Then gaining courage he added brusquely. “But give me to eat?”

He held out a hand, watching the vendor narrowly.

“Oh, oh,” laughed the old man, “you would eat free! Things are indeed coming to a pass when I who am poor beyond estimate am forced to feed all who come near me. . . . Still here —” With a flourish of his big copper ladle he dipped very deeply into his cauldron, as if generous feelings possessed him, bringing out notwithstanding the smallest possible amount of his hot mess by means of a quick turn of the handle. Then he partly filled a small coarse bowl, passing it to the child with the manner of the tradesman. Long experience had taught him that the farthing owed him would come

back to him soon enough,— with much interest.

“ Well, is it good? ” he remarked approvingly when the sturdy child had swallowed down every drop with wolfish rapidity. “ I see you could eat more. But I must have my money first. I, too, live from day to day.” He turned to the others. “ Whose child is this? ”

A woman with a baby in her arms edged up:

“ A man arrived, so I have heard, in the middle of the night and found a place to sleep with one of the militia. He had a child in a basket, it was also said. This must be him.”

The small boy stood there crossly twisting his fingers because he was still hungry, and also because he hated being the object of such attentions. Everybody was looking at him now with curiosity, wondering at his independence and his lack of fear and asking questions.

Quickly he answered, hating to tell anything and concealing much. Presently, bending down on the ground, he began playing with some little stones, not paying any further attention to the scene around him. The other children observed his antics with curious eyes: this ugly, strong, tiny boy, who had appeared during the night and

who seemed to belong to nobody, strangely fascinated them.

After a long interval one of them approached him, and a little timidly offered him a piece of flour-cake. Little Wang took it without a word of thanks and bolted it down like a savage young thing, resuming his playing as soon as he had finished. Then another, not to be outdone, gave him a little from his little bowl of congee, and squatting down beside him tried to talk to him in small baby words. The women and the old man drifted away, but all the children remained and were joined by others, who imitated what the newcomer was doing. Little Wang was making a regular pattern on the ground with his stones, working out a design from something he had once seen and not forgotten, so absorbed that he paid no attention to anything else.

The others continued to imitate him — disputing who should have the place next to him. Little Wang, by reason of that mysterious quality which sets one man over others, was already beginning to assert his leadership which he soon made legendary in the neighbourhood.

CHAPTER III

WITHIN three days his father had set up a forge inside this rude hut at the city gate and had commenced turning out quantities of coarse iron nails for the cart trade. The clang of his hammer sounded far into the night, and the child fell asleep to that jarring music just as he often awoke to it. The steady pant of the bellows — worked by a small boy who was paid three farthings a day for his labour — and the glowing heat of the charcoal, were as much part of his life as the sparrows chirping on the waste outside the door. Very early he understood the trick of picking up live embers in his fingers as his father often did: if you are quick that is as easily done as putting your hand into ice-cold water.

There was food in plenty, too; the boy could eat all day long, and he grew stronger and bigger almost visibly. Not only was there food at home; there was plenty to be picked up along every foot of the stretch of highway leading to

the frowning battlements of the city. No one would begrudge a child a bite when he announced as calmly as little Wang always did that he was hungry.

Soon he became friends with fifty men who gained their living by peddling cakes to the tide of traffic which endlessly swept in and out of the capital. When their baskets were sold out, it was always he whom they allowed to pick up the morsels from the bottoms until every crumb was gone. His quickness and his wisdom, in spite of his baby ways, delighted a people who see truth in common-sense.

Sometimes, too, he found money — those holed coins of infinitesimal value which the people used. He early discovered that if he searched carefully just beside the roadway, sooner or later coins which had been dropped by country bumpkins, coming out of the city the worse for their holiday-making, would be brought to light. He soon evolved a system of his own for working over the rutted roadway as a miner pans the gravel of a gold-bearing stream; and whenever he made a find his joy and excitement were amazing.

Each day and each month taught him something new. The other children of the city gate were filled with open admiration for everything he did: he learnt so fast every lesson from the great Book of Life spread before his eyes that he grew apace in wisdom. Always attentive and observant, nothing escaped him.

Especially remarkable was his power over animals. All living things seemed to claim relationship with him, and he never abused these ties. Before he was seven he knew how to catch rats with his bare hands, and how to approach vicious camels, who if you are not careful can display a savagery terrifying to all but their drivers. As for birds he had the strange power of talking to them until their fears were gone. Then, as warily as a cat he would pounce on them, catching fledgelings as easily as a man with a line will catch fish.

Everybody here kept birds and trained them to fly from their tasselled bird-sticks into the air and catch grain and seeds cast up to them. The whole population gave itself up to this sport. In the summer evenings a stream of men carrying cages or tasselled sticks, with their birds

lightly tied to them, came out of the city with their pets, and there were great competitions with an amazing rivalry aroused, particularly in singing and grain-catching. Hooded falcons, with their cruel eyes looking sharply at everything, might also still be seen in numbers in those days; they were carried by richly-attired men far out into the country where they were cast at sparrows, the greatest zest being shown in this cruel sport.

In such surroundings the boy never lacked companionship; every hour had its adventures, just as every season had its especial delights. The cruel winters, with their fierce winds brought ice and snow, but then there was ice-sliding on a frozen pool in which he soon excelled. Summer, with its blinding sunlight, allowed him to run naked and discover teeming life in every stagnant pond. He knew that the first thunder-storm would magically turn the whisking tadpoles into croaking frogs. And after the thunder-storms would come the soft rains. Then, he would sit hunched up singing to himself a rude little rhyme which all the children sang in imitation of the frogs:

Qua-qua,

Chi'rh hsia

Mi'rh hai hsia:

Qua-qua,—

Which was simply:

“Today it rains, oh, frog;

Tomorrow it will rain also.”

Sometimes he would sing this so long that he would lull himself to sleep by his music; and waking up with a start he would find that night had come. . . .

In cursing, too, he became royally proficient. Before he was eight he could out-curse any camel-driver, often bringing a clumsy lout half-asleep between the humps of his beast to the ground frantic with rage at the insults hurled at him for no reason at all by his shrill treble. His father would then beat him if he happened to be near; but he was swift of foot and very nimble — and hard to catch.

Sometimes, too, unaccountable gloom would come upon him. That was mainly because his father, being tired of work, would drink heated wine in a little pewter cup until he was quite drunk and then sit taciturn day after day only

bursting into words to upbraid his wife for her base desertion of him years ago. A sort of family loyalty and pride forbade the boy from mentioning this to any one, although the neighbourhood knew all about it. Indeed he would fight any one who brought up the subject: one day he attacked a giant of a man, who had made some remarks about his maternity, biting him on the knee so badly that he was picked up and thrown fully fifteen feet for his pains and nearly crippled from the experience.

And yet even that rude awakening never taught him prudence. For the whole region round the city gate was his domain and impelled him to adventures and combats. There were camels and temples and fields and encampments of armed men, and pilgrims and caravans — all the primitive bustle of the fourteenth century living on at the very threshold of the twentieth century and demanding his attention. Before he was nine he had seen a score of men publicly executed by a man in a red coat with a huge sword, and had watched with strangely staring eyes the stricken heads roll in the dust. Everything that happened was to him a phenomenon demanding

inquiry; and on each and everything he bestowed the flexible methods of the empiricist, thereby gaining in natural wisdom. He insulted the schoolboys going to school with their school-books under their arms, because instinctively he believed that the knowledge they were acquiring was only a conceit which carried them away from the workings of nature around them; he insulted them in many ways and with many words until one day a youthful scholar who was tired of his tirade turned on him and called back: "You — do you know what category you belong to? To the animals who merely hunger and thirst and know no books —"

It was the ironical laughter of the passers-by which henceforth made him leave youthful scholarship alone.

He suddenly realized that there might be something in learning.

CHAPTER IV

THE circumstances surrounding his first meeting with foreigners — those white-faced men and women of western race who had been nicknamed by the common people “foreign devils” — had a tremendous influence on him.

From his earliest years he could remember being half-frightened, half-fascinated by the awesome tales which were current regarding their strength and their violence — and of the dread things they did to children if they fell into their clutches. No mad whisperings among illiterate Russian peasants leading to pogroms of the Jews could surpass these insidious stories. Foreigners, it was said, when they wished powerful medicines, took the eyes of Chinese children and boiled them. They were also reported to cut up dead bodies, besides being willing to use their knives on the living whom they put to sleep with drugs and who woke up to find legs and arms missing. . . .

In this way was the work of hospitals discredited — only the very poor and wretched dared to go near them. The “devils” represented a hideous force which so exercised the public mind that it had been always easy in the past to raise a riot against them on the slightest provocation. Parents never failed to threaten children who plagued them with the declaration that they would be handed over to the tender mercies of the first devil who was met with. This threat was worse than any possible chastisement. It instantly brought submission.

Little Wang had caught a distant glimpse of them several times passing in and out of the city gate; but like the other children he had immediately run away and hid himself until the coast was clear. Once, when there was no time to escape, a friendly cake-seller had taken hold of him and covered his eyes tightly with his hands so that “the malign influence” should not be transmitted to him through his vision. That action had so fascinated him that he had talked about nothing else for days. He even invented a game, in which he played the part of the foreigner, and all the children had to protect one

another as the cake-seller had done from his influence when he approached.

Then had come the amazing adventure.

It was on a summer's afternoon, very late in the day when the August sun is still baking hot although it is about to set. All the world was drowsy and few were up and about. Stark-naked and supremely happy, he had wandered along the dusty highway into the country until he had come to a long irregular pond, full of stagnant water, with lilies growing in it, and frogs croaking their everlasting summer chorus. With the aid of a broken tool taken from his father's forge he had fashioned rudimentary boats and filled them with insects which tumbled in and out and fought one another and ended by dying the water-death.

Then, when he had tired of this sport, he had chased the slow and stupid dragon-flies with a stick on which was smeared bird-line borrowed from a neighbour, catching more than one by his surprising quickness. The diaphanous wings and the long shapely bodies provided him with new ideas: and with the aid of some strands of straw he had made for himself a crown of iri-

descent beauty — all shaking and moving with these creatures which he placed on his head, and which he thought entrancing.

As the sun sank lower and lower, the other children had wandered home, shrieked for by their mothers from the far distance who waved to them and threatened them to secure obedience. And because he had no mother to call him, he had mocked the others and settled down to play alone.

He was sitting in the dust of the highway, drawing patterns on the ground, with his dragon-fly crown still about his ears, when the sound of strange voices and the stamp of hoofs in the great silence made him glance up. As he understood what it was he gasped aloud in his horror. For there almost on top of him — not more than twenty feet away — was a huge foreign-devil, with a yellow beard and a great whip in his hand riding on a big horse; and beside him on another horse was a woman-devil, all in white save for her hat, and a veil which fell around her neck.

For once in his life his nimble wits entirely deserted him. He was so stricken that he could

neither think nor act. They had caught him out in the country — completely alone; there was not a soul to succour him.

Overcome and already feeling the malign influence striking down his spine, by a supreme effort he managed to wriggle away until he was out of their immediate way. But they had seen him: that was enough! They were making merry at his discomfiture, before they did something worse. The man was pointing at him, the woman was laughing.

As he cowered in the dust unable to move any further, he saw out of the corners of his eyes the foreign-devil drop his hand, put it into his pocket, pull it out quickly, and swing it fiercely towards him. There was a flash in the golden sunlight — a blinding flash. He closed his eyes and covered his head completely with his arms to meet the shock crushing the wriggling dragon-flies by this action. When he opened them, he was surprised to find himself alone and alive. The man and the woman were trotting their horses very fast and were rapidly becoming smaller in the distance. But there on the ground, almost at his knees, was a bright object.

With one leap he was on it and had clutched it in his hand.

It was a piece of silver, quite an immense piece, very bright and new, worth he did not know how many score of the copper-cash.

Miracle of miracles!

For a moment he stood like that turning the coin over and over in his hand, not willing to believe his good-fortune, doubting whether it was really his, biting it to prove its worth. Then, as he saw the figures on horse-back fade away, a fever of excitement possessed him and he dashed madly home. To every one he met he shouted the miracle which had come to him, the silver coin. A foreign-devil had thrown it to him, with one sweep of the hand, like that! He gave an elaborate pantomime so that they should precisely understand the setting and the manner it all had come to pass. He let every person feel the coin and ring it and bite it. It was genuine beyond doubt; a dozen told him that; but regarding its precise value opinions differed.

At last he reached the doorway of the parental hut. His father was sitting there, still stripped to the waist, cooling himself after his arduous

labours, at the forge. To him also in excited accents he told exactly what had happened — not once but many times, showing how he had crouched in the dust, how the coin had been thrown, how he had picked it up and his immense surprise.

A wondering crowd gathered. He was a hero, the head and front of all local interest. Nobody had ever heard of a story like that. The coin passed from hand to hand, was felt and appraised as it had never been appraised before. It was a dollar, a silver dollar. Then some one offered to exchange it — to give full value in copper cash.

The boy accepted the offer. His father, never saying a word, sat there puffing at his pipe, watching silently all the by-play. The boy was finally handed a double-string of cash; over a thousand coins, a veritable weight of wealth such as he had never felt before.

All evening he sat playing with the double-string, counting the coins to see that he had not been defrauded. He went to sleep with the money clutched across his chest, dreaming impossible dreams in which wealth rained on him in form of silver dollars.

CHAPTER V

EVER after that incident the world seemed different. The ugly, independent child, accustomed to the rigours of the daily struggle for existence — all the acerbities of a life so close to Nature that the people seemed to lie on our great universal mother's very bosom — this child understood in a flash that somehow it was not so with everybody. There were people who were rich; people who did not have to toil and moil — people who lived in plenty. He himself had been sufficiently strong to survive without trouble; but around him were spiritless children for ever whining and starving — breaking down and dying before the obstacles of life. This little world of elementary beings, living on the tide of life sweeping in and out of the city gate, had been his only lexicon; now he understood that there were other books.

From that day also the vague background of fear in which foreigners had stood suddenly dis-

appeared. It was replaced by an all-consuming curiosity.

He never ceased asking questions regarding them, "the devils," as he still called them from force of habit. Were there many of them in the city — how did they live — why had they wealth — were there no poor ones among them? — these were some of the things he asked.

By dint of questioning, he slowly built up a sort of picture which was still like a dream. He was told that there were a hundred or two of them in the city and that they came from over the seas in vessels driven by steam, fire-wheel vessels they were called in the vernacular. He learnt the expression without knowing what it really signified, until one day he saw a rude native print of a sea-battle being sold by a pedlar who told him that these were illustrations of the foreign ships.

His interest was such that he stood in front of the man for ever so long. He memorized the outlines so well that he was soon able to draw in the dust a fire-wheel ship with a stone, which was so amazingly accurate that a number of passers-by commended him for his talent. The

huge man with the yellow beard had come on one such as these, he thought to himself; these ships travelled hundreds of thousands of *li*, the pedlar had said. They often consumed a year in their voyages, and they could slay enormous numbers of people with their cannon which blazed forth their wrath if any one opposed them. In this twisted manner did the story of high sea navigation reach him.

These details delighted him and filled him with amazement. The power and novelty of it all enchained him and filled his brain. Sometimes, when he had swung himself up into a tree after a bird, he would fall into a day-dream, and sitting astride of a branch, would wonder if it would not be possible for him to get closer to these men and their many inventions. He would like to see their cannon exploding in wrath, and destroying every one so that the waters were filled with struggling beings as in the pedlar's print; it would be a spectacle worthy of being looked upon. Then, presently, he would turn his thoughts to silver and to a stream of coins. The coins would come like hail in his day-dream, and he would pick them up and buy everything that

his heart hungered for,—singing-birds and sweetmeats and a cap with a long red tassel, not to speak of much mutton from the Mohammedan mutton-shops.

Once he started out to try and reach the foreign quarter in the city; but after a few miles the immensity of the great capital frightened him and he ran back home. His father cursed him for playing truant in this way, saying ruefully to the neighbours as he had already said many times: "This boy's courage is too great. His courage is a sad thing."

This censure, however, did not dishearten him. It merely instilled in him greater caution and redoubled his desire to carry out one day his great plan.

He was always watching for foreigners coming out of the city; whenever he detected one in the stream of traffic which was not often, he would follow as fast as his legs could run. But all the neighbourhood had heard of his good fortune, and many urchins imitated him. The foreigners were only irritated by these unaccustomed attentions and instead of giving money shook their whips at the pack at their heels and rode quickly

away. Evidently there were limitations to their riches, the boy thought, or else their good-nature was hard to reach. In any case of silver dollars there was never a trace. Perhaps it needed something striking to attract their attention.

He reasoned this out by himself and determined to test it. He had stored away in secret hiding-places various treasures, such as birds and lizards and other delectable things; and now he set to work making attractive receptacles in which to place them. He stole empty tins from men who were careless, and with the aid of his father's tools made numerous holes so that his prey could be put inside and fed and properly exhibited. Soon he had a regular menagerie, properly housed. Then on the weekly holiday, on which the foreigners were apt to come out of the city, he disappeared far down the highway, going miles beyond the beat of every child in the neighbourhood, until he was lost in the country. Alone with his treasures he sat patiently waiting.

In the middle of the day he saw the first foreigners; they were in hooded carts, men and women together with servants accompanying

them. As soon as the carts approached he dashed up, exhibiting what he had and offering his captives for sale. Something in his eagerness and in his strange wares evidently amused them. They called to one another laughingly and shook their heads. One more generous than the others threw a handful of cash on the ground.

When they had gone he carefully picked up every coin and counted them. It was not wonderful as a sum of money. Still it was something. The silver dollar, however, remained unapproachable in its especial niche. . . .

CHAPTER VI

A LONG hard winter, with the world shrouded in snow, served to dim these impressions but not to efface them.

Wang the Ninth was now no longer a child but a growing boy on whom his father cast jealous looks — as on so much capital that was not bearing due interest. Occasionally by dint of blows and wrathful utterances he made the youth work at the forge, seating him at the first glimmering of dawn before the bellows and watching him so closely that there was never a chance of his stealing away to indulge in his eternal pranks.

When the North wind was blowing, and the highways were bare of traffic, it was not so bad to sit at this task and have the blaze of the white-hot embers warm him. Then the slow, regular pant of the bellows fused with the clang of hammer on the anvil and seemed to him the very incarnation of energy — of a force that drives things along. The boy would sit with his ugly,

expressive face gazing straight in front of him. Grasping the wooden handle of the bellows firmly in both hands and stretching his legs wide apart, he would work mechanically, lost in his dreams. All sorts of things would pass in procession before the little leaping flames, the heat affording him a certain sensual satisfaction which expressed itself in the laziness with which he answered his father's occasional remarks.

He would dream that he was lying on soft cushions with all his heart's desires scattered around him. He would tip over piles of coins and watch them idly roll around too indifferent even to pick them up. Barmecide feasts of a nature satisfying even to his voracious appetite would rise before him — mutton and roast ducks and all manner of browned pork heaped on great platters just as they were at the marriage feasts of rich men. Sometimes these fancies became so real that the saliva would trickle down his chin; and his father, noticing it, would inquire what was the matter.

“I am hungry,” he would answer laconically, refusing to make any confidences and returning to his dreams.

That was when the weather was bad and the bitter North winds blew.

But when the sun shone, even in cold winter it was almost impossible to keep the boy at his task; he escaped by the use of amazing stratagems, disappearing beyond all quest and only returning when it was dark. He would never tell his father where he went; even a beating would not make him confess. Why should he give away his secrets — all the wonderful hiding-places he had discovered, where he went with an impudence and a cunning that were sublime?

He knew, for instance, by going along the ice of the Imperial Canal, how to slip under the bars of the magnificent barge-house where the Imperial barges were docked all winter. He had at first not dared to do more than peer in — pretending, when any one appeared even in the far distance, that he had fallen down whilst indulging in the delectable pastime of sliding on the ice by means of an iron runner fastened to one foot as all the boys in the neighbourhood did. But that was in the early stages of the game. Soon he accustomed himself to pushing open im-

pudently the sliding-bars; and then by creeping right inside along a narrow stone parapet he finally was actually on the barges. There he would sit himself on the broad comfortable seats, and for want of something better to do would roll about on them like a dog. Once he had asked a pedlar friend what would happen if any one were found inside the Imperial barge-house.

"He would be promptly killed," had answered the man. "But then nobody would dare such folly."

The reply had set him pondering. Of course, the guards might catch him one day: he did not wish to be killed.

After the pedlar's remark he used always to loiter past the guard-houses to see what the guards were doing. It was their amazing sloth which led him step by step to complete indifference. They were always sleeping or eating or going off into the city leaving the youngest recruit nominally on duty. Once he surprised them all drunk as a result of a weight-lifting contest with great stones, in which the losers had to pay the forfeit in wine. They were lying

around the guard-house so stupefied that it would have been easy to enter and rob them of their arms!

One summer he conceived the audacious plan of viewing from a safe hiding-place the whole Imperial Family as it embarked on the barges for the beautiful lakes in the Hills. Every one in the neighbourhood was talking about it: as usual the great ones would leave the city in the sixth month when the great heat had commenced. On such occasions every soul of the common herd was shut indoors to permit the cortège to pass in perfect seclusion. Blue cloth screens were hung along the roadway, and although many declared that by putting their eyes to cracks in their windows they had caught glimpses of the magnificent sedan-chairs and the hosts of retainers, not one of them had ever looked on the face of the great emperor or the great empress.

By dint of watching closely, Wang the Ninth was able to judge when the fateful hour was fast approaching; for the barges were being beautifully polished and were taken out for exercise

precisely as if they had been living things. It was no longer safe even to go near them; the guards had become suddenly diligent and would not tolerate the slightest deviation from the fixed rules.

By entering into conversation with them and by running errands for some of them, he at length discovered precisely when the great event was expected. The guards told him grumblingly that they would have to stay up all night prior to the arrival of the cortège, to prevent any mishap. For days he watched very carefully and one evening his vigilance was rewarded. Not only were the guards busy with the boats; but expert watermen had arrived who were engaged in testing everything and who continually disputed regarding the division of money which was later to be distributed. Unless a change of plans was made at the last moment in two days' time the Court would come out of the city. That was what he now heard.

During these two days the boy was in a fever of excitement. He had his plan all complete but he was not sure that he would be able to execute it. On the fateful morn he rose long

before dawn and softly unlatching the door stole out as silently as a cat.

There was no moon, and the intense darkness disconcerted him. In the distance, along the highway, he could hear the men of the militia patrol softly singing to themselves to keep away spirits. It seemed to him that there were many more than usual: certainly they were moving about in a way which was not customary with them. Big lanterns showed the headquarters of each post.

Hugging the line of houses he rapidly got beyond the suburb. Then, using shortcuts which he knew as well as any of the wine-smugglers, he finally reached the banks of the Imperial Canal. He was about a half-a-mile from where the barges lay moored against the stone-faced embarkment.

Lights were moving about on them and he hugged himself for joy. There was no doubt that the start would soon be made. Still the most difficult part of the business remained to be done: he had to conceal himself in the most complete manner conceivable.

He waited patiently, gnawing at a piece of stale flour-cake he had carried with him, and

glancing repeatedly towards the East for the first glimmer of dawn. Like every Chinese peasant he could locate the points of the compass even in the dark, and he never lost his sense of direction.

Presently there was a little light — not much, but enough to mark clearly the dim outlines of the trees. He found the one he wanted. Ten feet from the water was a half-rotted tree trunk with a hole big enough for his head. He gathered some of the reeds and rank grass and put them in a handy pile near by. Then he dug up a clot of earth with a plant growing in it, and rounded it off so that he could clap it right on his head. Having completed these preparations he rehearsed his part, thrusting his head through the hole in the tree-trunk and putting the plant and the clot of earth on his head and the reeds on his body so that there should be no mistake. He was absolutely satisfied that if he lay stone-still and peeped through with half-shut eyes not a soul could possibly discover him, even a few yards away.

Dawn had now come and round the barges he could see a growing bustle. Square marquees of

blue cloth had risen like mushrooms, and horsemen were continually arriving. A cavalry patrol unexpectedly galloped down the roadway behind him and forced him to conceal himself like a frightened frog in his rotted tree. With his eyes greedily drinking in every detail, he lay and watched. Twice he was disappointed in his hopes; for twice there had been a mighty bustle but nothing had come of it. But at last when the sun was already high, a great slow procession reached the marquees; and after a long pause one barge commenced moving, then a second, then many smaller boats.

Along the road came cavalry. Now the barges, steadily rowed, began floating towards him rhythmically, cleaving their way through the lotuses and the weeds which hung like shagreen on the glassy surface.

He drank it all in with awe-struck eyes, his vast curiosity crushing down his fears.

On each barge were numbers of men in red tasselled hats and long official robes, standing motionless. These were the court eunuchs, he was sure. Nearer and nearer floated the barges slowly, rhythmically. Now he saw in through

the pale blue silk curtains of the first glass-house. There was a lonely figure inside. It must be the emperor. It was impossible to see clearly. But behind, in the second barge, he saw quite distinctly an imperious elderly lady and many young ladies in beautiful silks. That was the old Buddha—the Empress Mother. He had seen her—he had seen her.

Slowly, very slowly, like a mirage, the scene faded. He lay entranced, not daring to move. The blue marquees had been struck and the common people were beginning to pass freely and still he did not move. That was the *Lao Fo*—the old Buddha, the mighty Empress mother!

When he at last went home, with the mud of the river-bank clinging to him, he told his father in a matter of fact way that he had fallen into a pond, while looking for something he had lost.

CHAPTER VII

SOON after this his father began using him to carry his rudely fashioned iron-ware into the city, where it was handed over to middlemen who scrutinized every place with the eyes of hawks and who paid a mere pittance for this labour of sweat and tears. The boy, however, cared nothing for the business details, although he mechanically cursed the rapacity of the city-bred as his father did. He was conscious, however, that the middlemen, in their long respectable blue coats, were an essential element in the system which held them up. They represented credit. When it was known that he and his father were working on a job of so many hundred iron-nails, or so many flanges, the neighbourhood gave them credit for the amount they would earn, and they could eat in peace. Each time he carried a heavily-laden hemp sack with a completed order to the middlemen, his father would partially settle their local debts. Sometimes on the big settlement-days

(which came three times a year) there would be trouble and blows because their accounts were in arrears. Then the boy would avoid every one and sit apart hanging his head, for he vaguely knew that his father's respectability was not what it should be.

What enchanted him in the city was the freedom and bustle. Although his errands were within easy reach of the city gate, he so contrived it that he went far afield, running all the way home so as to have ample time to loaf and stare. For a long while the glamour of mingling with the crowds and gazing into the handsome shops, and watching craftsmen at work was enough to keep him interested. He became familiar with the wealth of a city that was mighty in those days because it drained the provinces and because everybody was provided against want. There were princes and princesses abroad accompanied by handsome bands of retainers, who drove the common people off the driving-road as if they were mere carrion crows. He liked the insolence of their manners which was in keeping with his conception of the rules of a nation; and very often he

ran alongside a great red-wheeled princely cart to show his esteem — until he was driven off with a crack of the whip. Now that he had seen with his own eyes the emperor and the empress mother, he found it only just and reasonable that those who were of the blood royal should act as though the world were their property. That was how he liked it: at least there should be some who could do as they liked and to whom riches meant nothing at all.

One day a demon possessed him to go to a Temple Fair which was held every tenth day of the month and which attracted great multitudes of people. He had always wanted to go but his father had refused to give him money. Now he had the opportunity. In the noise and excitement of that closely-packed throng he lost his head, and after a short mental struggle began coolly spending the coins he had received in payment for his father's work. He tasted sweetmeats which brought tears of joy to his eyes, and he bought clever toys of bamboo and coloured paper which enchanted him. The little stock of copper cash was half-spent before he realized what he had done, and, at length,

stricken with alarm, he walked home slowly and hesitatingly.

His father was sitting at the door of his hut, smoking and waiting for him after his wont. Directly he saw him his father cursed him for being so slow. The boy frowned hard as he approached; yet in spite of his fear he dealt with the matter with his curious bluntness and directness. Seating himself on his heels he counted out what was left of the money and then heavily sighed.

"I have spent more than half," he announced with grim resolution. "I wandered to the Fair, and because there were many things to buy and others had money to spend I spent too."

His father rose furiously, with a clumsy threatening gesture.

"Whose money was it you carried?" he asked. "Whose money, I say?"

"Yours," answered his son sullenly because he was offended now. "But I have given you the reason and I will repay in due course from what I earn."

"Come here," commanded the father, sweeping all his excuses aside.

The boy hesitated. His father picked up a heavy tool. The boy was caught between a feeling of filial duty which was intense and deep among the people and a new feeling of independence.

"You would strike me with that?" he asked, frowning hard.

"Come here," shouted his father again, and that shout decided him

"No," he said, folding his arms. "I shall not come."

"Little son of a toad," shouted the infuriated man, rushing at him. "I will teach you, I will teach you."

He swung up the heavy tool, but the boy dived with amazing dexterity, and then ran backwards. Again and again the father aimed blows that would have murdered him, but always missed. Then the growing crowd that had gathered flung themselves in between the two and held the infuriated man shouting in their arms. The father's hysteria mounted higher and higher: the pent-up wrong of ten years ago surged out from his mouth.

"Son of a harlot, come here, that I may slay

you," he shrieked at last, wrestling like a maniac. At that the boy turned to a deathly hue,— under his bronzed face.

"Enough," he cried thickly, "I came here from afar with you and now I go again. Never shall I return."

He turned with a clumsy dramatic gesture; looked round once to see that he was not followed, and then running quickly towards the city gate was lost in the throng.

The crowd released the father. All talked volubly all the time. This was a business which must be amicably settled. But the father never answered. He made a hesitating step or two like a drunken man, then reeled to the door of his hut which he opened and slammed behind him.

The wondering crowd, consumed with curiosity, only slowly dispersed. This outbreak was of the stuff that made up their daily lives. It was in the air, always lurking half-hidden behind the blue-cotton exterior of their monotonous existence, coming in sudden storms. Swift, well-recognized and very often fatal to the weak, but nevertheless accepted as something which comes directly from Heaven.

CHAPTER VIII

FOR many days no one in the neighbourhood saw or heard of the boy; he had disappeared as utterly as if the ground had swallowed him up. The neighbourhood gossiped about the incident as they loitered about in the evening watching the father sitting motionless and silent at his door. And in the Eastern way the tale grew until it was averred that the father had tried to slay his son with his huge smith's hammer and that he was grimly waiting for the truant's return to carry out his threat. It was said that the boy had fled back to the village whence he had originally come years before in that inconsequential way on a creaking wheelbarrow, and that never would he be seen again.

"Perhaps he has killed himself," suggested the women, always willing to believe the worst. But the men shook their heads, firm in the belief that in this case flight to the ancestral village had been sufficient redress.

Yet could they have only known it, Wang the Ninth was not far away — in fact, less than two miles as the crow flies. He had gone at his fast jog-trot not in through the city gate as they had all supposed (for that was only a feint), but round the city along those desolate outer stretches which recall the sandy deserts of High Asia. On and on he had gone until at last he had come upon a group of humble dwellings made of reeds and mud and placed strategically just where the mighty stone girdle of the capital sweeps round in a giant curve to form the northern face of the rectangle. There he had slowed down his running to a walk; and, cautiously glancing around to see that he was not observed, he had at length walked into the biggest house as bold as brass and announced most casually: "I have come for work."

The men gathered there on the brick *k'ang* had laughed at him at first; for who had ever heard of entrusting the smuggling of wine to a thirteen-year old boy? For this was their peculiar business: smuggling wine into the city so as to avoid the city-dues. It was not majestic or even very dangerous work, but it required a

certain tenacity — and great climbing powers. For it was over the wall of the city that they practised their evasion, carrying to the wine-taverns the yellow wine of the country in leather bottles which were packed on their backs much as a soldier carries his knapsack. Often had Wang the Ninth observed them as they ran crouching to the city wall. He had made inquiries and thoroughly informed himself. So now, in answer to their rough gibes, he said:

“It is true I have never attempted this business, but I have carried concealed bottles very often and I know many tricks. Often have I heard how you climb the wall here at dawn and dusk. I, too, would engage in this enterprise.”

Thus had he spoken. Then when they cursed him for his effrontery he had shrugged his shoulders. Presently because he was so persistent they had relented, and declared that if he wanted to risk it, they would try him.

“But would you not show fear?” inquired one in a last doubt.

“Fear!” he retorted. “Who speaks of fear! Give me a day to learn correctly, and I will walk up the wall as a man goes up a rope.”

His assurance had completely won the day, as it always does in every affair in life. He was fed and went to sleep on the brick *k'ang* under the coat of the man who had first spoken in his favour; and on the morrow at grey dawn he went out with three men bearing leather bottles and followed them up the angle of the city wall as easily as if it had been a tree.

"It is nothing," he remarked scornfully as they crouched together on the top of the great rampart to make sure that no guards were about: for the men in the guard-house occasionally made a raid to justify their existence. He spoke thus because he was elated by the giddy sensation of the climb, and he boasted when he should have thanked the generosity of Heaven.

"Wait for the descent," chorussed the others. "That is not so easy even for us who have done it so often. Perhaps you will know fear."

They darted across the broad brick platform to the inner parapet, crouching low as they ran, for there was a guard-house a few hundreds yards away. Without a word the first man went over, then the second, then the third, each making the dizzy descent slowly, cautiously,

their backs to the wall at the angle where the buttress juts out squarely — walking down sedately like human flies — which is a trick which may be occasionally seen even to this day, and is possible because of the innumerable crevices which time and water-erosion have worked into the brickwork.

The boy watched them from top, and memorized as well as he could every step, as he studied all the cracks and interstices in the mammoth defence. But when his turn came he found that his stretch was smaller than that of a full-grown man and that the strain was great both on arms and legs. Half-way down he became a little tired and a little afraid. But with iron resolution he conquered the shaking of his knees and the faintness in his heart; and at length won the battle and jumped the last six feet, falling and lying on the ground panting whilst his leather bottles rolled near him.

“It is nothing,” he remarked, as his breath returned. “If I were full-grown I could do it with my eyes blindfolded in less than a week. It is nothing and less dangerous than a swaying tree-top.”

“This boy has too much courage,” said one man morosely. “We have done ill to take him. This courage will lead to rashness. Who knows where it will lead!”

So had spoken the representative of a society so constituted that its safety is held endangered by any one who displays contempt for the all-pervading caution. Wang the Ninth did not know about these things, and certainly would not have cared if he had. He was just a small human animal, amazingly self-reliant and amazingly resourceful. His pride had been deeply hurt by his father's public insult of him. There was consequently a mass of sullen rage deep down in his heart — a mass as solid and as heavy as a cannon-ball. For of all things that you may say, even in the sharpest disputes, there is one which must be sedulously avoided. Between father and son this rule is iron. The father had broken the rule and so it was better for the son to carry leather bottles of wine up the city wall than to remain at his side. Beyond this the boy did not reason much although he meditated endlessly as he worked at his new trade. Sometimes the smugglers were detected

by the guards and then there was a confused *sauc-qui-peut* to the sound of a few shots that made a great deal of noise but were comparatively harmless. Once, however, one of his mates lost courage and fell a considerable distance, breaking some bones and stopping the whole enterprise for days; for the smugglers were at bottom a miserable lot who had lost all real courage through years of stealth.

One day something prompted him to give them the slip, and very calmly he marched down the outer street of the suburb which led to his father's hut watching narrowly to see how his return was taken.

His acquaintances greeted him with cries of astonishment. "Here is Wang the Ninth back again!" they exclaimed, crowding round him. "See, he has a red girdle round his waist and new clothing on his back."

But he shook them off and ran on when they attempted to cross-question him; for he was of a loyal nature and moreover had no intention of allowing the world to know what a nefarious occupation he had been engaged in.

Near his home some of his former play-mates,

still secretly admiring his independent attitude and a certain roughness he had sedulously cultivated, said to him in discreet voices:

"You ought to have come sooner. Your father has been sick these many days. Had it not been for the neighbours he would have fared ill indeed. Money and food are lacking."

Now he hastened on. His bravado had vanished and there was gloom in his heart. In some trepidation he opened the door of his father's hut and walked in, watched from the street by all his youthful friends.

Inside, stretched on the rude bed of boards, lay his father, quite motionless and covered in a sheep-skin coat, although the weather was warm.

"I have returned," said the son, coming up to him and speaking in his quick city vernacular which was so unlike his father's slow uncouth country speech. "How has this happened?" he added, bending down now. The resentment within him had faded, for was this not his father?

The sick man only groaned for reply, fixing on him glassy eyes.

"How is it?" repeated the youth in the query

which every one in the country uses a dozen times a day, and feeling at a loss what to do. He had never before been confronted with the phenomenon of physical collapse. It left him awkward and chagrined.

"It is fever," mumbled the father at length sighing heavily. "If there were money for medicine it might be better. But the neighbours have given me freely and I cannot borrow more."

"I will attend to it," said the stripling, and with that he marched out again and down the street to a shop with a gaudy gilt front and a massive counter covered with blue cloth.

"Medicine for fever," he said, abruptly putting down a piece of silver, and leaning against the counter to see that full weight was given him. Presently he received twenty-four little packets done up in rough brown paper which were guaranteed to be the very best of the herbalist's art. With these in his hand he marched back and settled down to the task of tending his sick parent. He displayed the same phlegm he had shown in the smuggling of wine. Three times a day he drew water from the common well and lit the fire and boiled congee, and bought things as if

he had been trained to housework all his life; for this curious nation is like that — all can settle to any task with patience and ease. But his father instead of getting better, became worse. Sometimes for many hours he lay without speaking or moving, and the boy frowning deeply, became gloomy and very silent.

“It is a bad business,” he said to the neighbours when they met him on the street. “He makes no progress.”

One night he was awakened from a dead sleep by the man’s cries and the thrusting movements of his arms. He sprang up and lit the tallow candle in great alarm. His father was sitting up catching at his throat and gasping for breath, a hideous sight, with his forehead so long unshaven and his queue so unkempt. The boy tried to give him water but the bowl fell from the palsied hand. He picked it up and supported the sufferer but with a sudden twist the man turned over and died.

Wang the Ninth, in the presence of death, cried aloud like a frightened animal and then ran to the door, shouting that his father was dead. He had never seen death come before — it came to

him as an injustice rather than a blow. He wished others to measure it as he measured it: wished them to realize the drama. But the neighbours were sunk in sleep and when he beat on their doors he only heard them stir and mutter that the fire-devils which prowl at night were around. Nothing would induce them to open although they must have plainly heard the boy's voice.

So quaking with fear he crept back at last and sat with his head on his knees and his teeth chattering looking at the recumbent motionless figure and waiting for dawn.

When daylight came he went out and the neighbours came willingly enough then, in a never-ending stream to stare and make comments. He mourned loudly, beating himself on the breast and looking very miserable, death being an important and ceremonious event and being so considered by all. As there were no relatives, the headman of the locality came and made a rude inventory, and then reported the case to the coffin-guild who prepared a suitable coffin and sent two men with lime to pack the corpse. All the children of the neighbourhood

stood in a crowd together at the door, watching and trying to see every movement, for a burial is like a marriage and never fails to awaken interest, the one being the ending of life, just as the other is its procreation.

For a day or so things remained like that with the coffin in the hut. Then when everything was in order, they dressed him in coarse white mourner's cloth and placed a cap of the same material on his head, and the coffin was lifted up by four men on carrier's poles; and preceded by a fellow blacksmith, who carried paper money to be burnt in imitation shoes of silver (such as the dead man had never dreamed of in his life) and followed by the mourning boy, the coffin was carried to the temple of the locality, pending formal disposal.

CHAPTER IX

THIS humble affair settled, the elders of neighbourhood gathered to decide what should become of the boy and how the debt which had been incurred for the burial and the sickness should be met. The amount realized by the few effects left was barely sufficient to pay one half, and it was necessary by some means to find security for the balance. The boy was the last unliquidated asset.

He had been given shelter in a house near by; and when he heard that they were debating the question of apprenticing him to a big foundry just inside the city gate so that his work might liquidate the debt, he became alarmed.

After much silent cogitation he felt his belt, and finding a coin or two still left, he decided to have his destiny settled once and for all. Slipping quietly down the street, he came to a grave old man seated at a table by the roadside who cast horoscopes.

Without a second's hesitation he placed his

money on the table; and sat down obediently on the bare wooden bench to learn his fate.

Every Chinese is possessed of eight characters — four of the Ten Heavenly Stems and four of the Twelve Earthly Branches; and it is by means of these, combined with the Five Elements, that the future may be known. By indicating the year, month, date and hour of birth, which are taught to children at a very early age, the group of eight characters is assembled: then there remains the question of discovering which of the Five Elements, that is metal, wood, water, fire or earth, is to dominate the group and how the interpretation is to be read. The most skilled use the Book of Changes, which was in common use some thirty centuries ago, and by this method see clearly into some scores of years. But there are common fellows who work as well on a simpler system.

Wang the Ninth believed implicitly in all this as a European child believes in the Biblical story of Creation. The truth of it was so immanent that it was a mere manifestation of scholarship to ascertain the precise facts. So he settled himself on the hard wooden bench all

attention while the old man peered at him over his spectacles, and arranged the little painted squares with their distinctive characters as he replied to the questions. Presently he had all the data complete — save for the determination of the element which would control him. When he learnt that he was a blacksmith's son he put all the elements aside save metal and fire; with these two in his fingers he consulted his books.

"You were born by fire," he said at last. "That is quite clear to me from the insistence with which your year indicative is repeated under the fire-element. By fire you will live and be tested. Wait till I combine: then we may see how the future grows."

With that he swept the fire-character into the heap of Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches: he shuffled the lot slowly backwards and forwards under his hands as a priest performs a rite. Then he took three ancient coins and shook them in a goblet: three times he repeated the process so that he should acquire the necessary guidance. He noted swiftly with the aid of his brush their import on a piece of red paper, and muttered to himself at the insistence with

which the original indications were repeated.

Wang the Ninth sat stone-still watching every movement. A soldier with a bundle of clothing on his shoulder had stopped in idle curiosity: there was another wayfarer or two as well. All these people were silent in the presence of learning; for each one of them at the appointed season would consult such a man regarding marriage or distant journeys or the settling of any important business.

Now the old man stopped his shuffling motion abruptly, aligned the characters, and drank in their meaning as a scholar does a clear script. The onlookers crowded forward so as not to miss a word.

"Born by fire," he began, "you are in opposition to water—yet are you attracted by it. Everything from water must influence you. By water, rivers and oceans are meant: dominated will you be by something from over the sea which will shape your life and violate your ancestry."

He consulted a book.

"Yet fire will return to you. By fire will you be tested. See here is it written—strange men shall lift you up and great perils shall you face

but you will not flinch. Stormy will be your life, but finally successful. Violent death will approach you but you will survive. Your destiny is with unaccustomed things which will come upon you before you are yet a man and drag you far away. So is it written. I would scan your features."

The boy rose and put his strong ugly face close to the learned one who now murmured:

"Confirmatory signs are evident in the features. The mouth, colour, nose, ears are good, but there is lacking the proper heaviness of eyebrow. Guard against being turned from your purpose, for there is weakness in your eyebrows. Now the hands?"

The boy held out his hands but the old man did not consult the palms: he was interested only in the shape.

"The fire-test," he murmured, "everywhere the fire-test. In four places is the character written as clearly as with the brush. Go, I have told you all."

"But the year of the test, may I not learn the year?"

The old man muttered to himself.

"Yes," he said, "that is also marked. But let me confirm."

Again he shook the three little *cash* arranging a character at each throw.

"There it is written for you," he remarked, "by the cyclic sign. *Keng-tzu-nien* — the twenty-sixth year of the Emperor. This year is the twenty-fourth. In two years your test will come."

The boy walked away slowly — powerfully impressed by what had been told him. He left unanswered a taunting remark of the soldier with the bundle. He was absorbed by the prospect held out to him. It was his manifest destiny to become associated with foreigners in some way. The mere fact that this coincided with the plan he had already dimly formed so impressed him that a sort of timidity possessed him.

He stopped by the banks of the Imperial Canal, near the scenes of his youthful escapades with the Imperial barges, and threw stones idly at some ducks in the water which sought shelter with a loud quacking. But amusements which formerly used to delight him had lost their power. He ate his evening meal in silence, not

telling any one what he had done and he went to sleep in the same uncommunicative mood. He was awake at dawn and yawning greatly, he idled about waiting for the first meal so that he could at least make his escape on a full stomach.

By noon not only had he eaten, but everybody was engaged or away. So very quietly he rolled up his strip of bedding, thrust such spare clothing as he had inside, and got out of the window with the speed and stealth of a cat. Then with his head down he ran by a circuitous route through the fields, not to his own city gate, where he was so well-known, but due south to the next gate where he was a total stranger. Through this one he entered the city and rapidly made his way to the foreign quarter where he had never been.

The afternoon sun was flooding the streets with golden light when he passed the first foreigner's door. There was strange writing on the door, resembling the Arabic on the houses of rich Mohammedans, he thought to himself. He slowed down and began dawdling, hoping that he would receive some guidance. At last he addressed himself to a doorkeeper — but the man

hardly listened to him. Then he saw a groom with some foreign horses, and he loitered up to him and asked him if he knew a foreigner with a big red beard. This man laughed and said that many had red beards and that as he did not know the name he could not say. The boy being tired, sat down on his bundle, and watched every foreigner who passed. Ten or twelve did he see in the course of an hour but none had red beards and all paid no more attention to him than had he been a stone on the roadway. Perhaps the man with the red beard had gone away. As this thought occurred to him he became sorrowful. Then fatalism possessed him and he knew that he would meet him; and presently, oddly comforted, he had an inspiration. Now he went to the nearest foreign gateway, and accosting a man there asked:

“Is there no place where I can most easily see all the foreigners?”

To his delight the man answered — there was a guild-house where they played daily with balls and otherwise amused themselves.

Rapidly he made his way to the spot indicated, and took his stand.

Dusk was coming and it was hard to see. Carts and ponies were collected near this entrance and the carters and grooms sat and talked together. Wang the Ninth, very hungry, now tightened his belt and stiffened his purpose.

Time flowed by as he watched by the oil-lamp. Foreigners came in and went out, sometimes singly, sometimes in pairs. There were not as many as he had expected—in fact there were few. But presently his heart leaped and he ran forward calling. Here was the red-bearded man walking by himself with a big stick in his hand.

“I have come for employment *ta lao-yeh* (your Honour),” he babbled, speech pouring from his mouth like water from a tap. “Many miles have I walked without food to seek you and to find what I may. If you will give me favour, I will serve diligently.”

The red-bearded man had paused amused.

“Where do you come from?” he asked in the colloquial.

“From the west city gate,” said the boy. “Once I met in years gone by Your Honour. You were riding. By you was a lady. I was small and in the dust. I ran and crouched

away, for never had I seen a foreigner before. So did I remain with my head bowed. Then as you passed you laughed and spoke in your language to the lady and she laughed even as your excellency had done. There was a great flash. I foolishly thought it was your magic to destroy me; but you had thrown a silver dollar to me and it had rolled to where I lay. I picked it up and to all in the neighbourhood is the story known. Since early childhood have I remembered. Now that I am without father or mother or other support I come for employment from your Honour."

The big red-bearded man had listened without a word. Could any one have looked close into his eyes they would have seen there a certain moisture. Twice he looked down at the boy and twice away. Then he said abruptly:

"I can remember, too. The years are not so many. Follow me. Employment shall be found."

He marched straight down the street until he came to the gateway guarded by the self-same gatekeeper who had so angrily repudiated any knowledge of him. The gateway, now open and

lighted offered a warm welcome; and Wang the Ninth, safe in the knowledge that he was adequately protected, followed his patron in with a contemptuous smile, whilst his erstwhile oppressor shut the gate behind them and then stood watching them motionless. Down the broad walk the red-bearded man led the boy never saying a word until he reached the door of his house.

"Wait here," he remarked briefly as he entered.

The boy, left alone in the dim light, was not in the least embarrassed by his surroundings. He examined the broad verandah and the flowering bushes in the ample compound with appreciation in his eyes.

"This is good," he said to himself. "Here is one who is obviously wealthy. No matter what my task may be, I shall never lack anything year in and year out."

As these thoughts occurred to him exultation coursed through his body. This was more wonderful than anything he had expected. Cautiously he approached the front-door and peered in through the glass; the interior was full of all

sorts of other valuables such as he had never seen before.

His mouth watered, and his eyes remained round with astonishment.

"This is beyond reckoning," he murmured to himself approvingly. "Each thing has its fixed value and added together they make a great sum. It is quite evident that if many are poor some are rich."

He was still engaged in cogitating the matter when the voice of the red-bearded man sounded behind him. He turned with a start and saw that he was approaching with servant who was listening to him respectfully.

"Come here," said the master. "What is your name?"

"Wang old number nine, your Honour," answered the boy, using his common appellation in the manner of the common people.

At that both master and man laughed.

"But your full name?" inquired the former.

The boy stammered:

"My full name? From the moment I was carried to the city always have I been called Wang the Ninth, being the eighth child of my

father's family. Chih Liang is my personal appellation, though never used. But it is as you wish."

Once again master and man smiled. There was a directness in this talk which was as the soul of democracy.

"And what have you done in the way of work?" asked his patron once again.

The boy hung his head and fidgetted with his hands.

"I have run wild," he confessed. "Sometimes I assisted my father although without regularity. Sometimes I did other work."

"What work?"

He hesitated. Then, though embarrassed not a little, he announced frankly:

"I smuggled wine."

"You smuggled wine! How and when?"

The boy made a rough gesture with his hand, as if explanation were superfluous.

"At dawn I climbed the city wall with others, carrying country wine which had paid no taxes into the city. For many months it went well, but in the end I abandoned it, although there was a daily profit."

The red-bearded man was pulling his beard and observing him much amused.

"A smuggler's apprentice," he exclaimed. "Well, well. I am doing evil to take you. But is it not true that my gatekeeper was once a robber? Tell me, Shih," he continued, turning to his man.

"It is true," answered the groom, who hated the gatekeeper because he was a Mohammedan and had his own customs and was moreover in secret league with all the horse-dealers, who were Muslims, thereby taking from his profit in all buying and selling. "It is known to all."

"So be it," said the master reflectively. "Faithfulness of service is the only important matter." He turned to the boy. "Listen. For one month I shall give you trial in the stables. Food and lodging shall you have. Later the terms of employment will be stated. All depends on what service you render me. Now go."

And with that he left the stripling in the hands of the groom who marched him off to his corner of the compound and assigned him his duties.

Three times a day must he draw water from

the well. Twice daily must the horse-courts be swept. It was his business to lead two ponies for their daily exercise. Never must he mount them or else he would be whipped. As for food he showed him the cooking-pots which it was his business to prepare. There was food ready now.

Wang the Ninth, at that invitation, sat on his heels, seized a bowl and chop-sticks, and devoured a meal such as he had seldom eaten. Then, after that, because he had a full belly he talked until he reeled with sleep, retailing to the stable-hands his most exciting adventures. Later, in the unbroken quiet of the horse-courts, he climbed on to the *k'ang* assigned him and slept a leaden sleep.

CHAPTER X

THE soft, regular life into which he had fallen soon affected the boy queerly: he chafed and became openly moody. His simple duties were so easily performed that he had endless time hanging on his hands. Although he belonged to a race with a genius for passivity, this quality covers certain explosive tendencies which require a regular outlet.

In Wang the Ninth was to be found a compendium of all the virtues and vices of an ancient system. Quick, impetuous, warm-hearted and highly intuitive, there was mixed with these things a certain laziness and indifference to everything save appearance and settled customs. Absolutely honest wherever a definite trust was given him, the boy nevertheless hugely enjoyed all kinds of illicit things. It was the fact that he could not indulge his passion for such enterprises that discontented him: here everything was well-ordered and regular — a sleek existence in all truth.

"Ours is a good master," said the stable-hands gratefully on many occasions. "A man could live here a hundred years and never fear for his employment." To which Wang the Ninth would only give a qualified approval.

One day, when he was wandering in the compound, he discovered the existence of a little door artfully masked behind a tree. It was in strict consonance with his principles that he should keep quiet about the matter, particularly as he had been told that he would be whipped if he went where he had no business to be. He pondered over the matter unendingly for lack of anything else to do, and at last the little door aroused in him a veritable passion of curiosity which became an obsession. Sometimes, when he was exercising the ponies by leading them endlessly round the circular cinder-walk, he would stop short and lose himself in speculations until he was aroused by the animals sniffing at his head. Once he was so deep in thought that the head-groom asked him what he was mooning over.

"I am thinking of family-affairs," he replied abruptly, which was equivalent to saying that

the matter was beyond public discussion, since no one outside the immediate family circle is qualified to discuss them.

After that he would sing to himself ever so softly as he walked the ponies slowly round the exercising-ground, so that no man might know what was in his mind. But when he was released from his duties, and dusk had fallen, he would scarcely ever fail to saunter round the straggling compound and at last work his way to the little door. Then, after a look to see that he was not observed, quick as lightning he would dart in and test it to see if through carelessness it had been left unlocked. Many times he did the same thing, and as many times was he disappointed. He began to believe that the masked entrance had no significance at all and had come down from days when the property belonged to some one else.

At last, however, he had the inspiration to use the native plan of putting dust in the key-hole to see if the key were used; the very next evening when he came back his quick eyes saw that a key had actually been thrust in and the dust nearly all knocked out. There was a clear

mark which was easily recognizable. Three times he tried the experiment, and three times it produced the same result. He was embittered with the knowledge that the door was regularly used but how or why he failed to discover.

One evening he put his arms round the tree which masked the door, kicked off his shoes, and with his amazing climbing-powers, swarmed up as easily and as rapidly as if it had been a ladder. At last he was able to look over the high white wall.

He was rather disappointed.

On the other side there was a neat little courtyard, which was flanked on three sides — north, east, and west — by little buildings, full of latticed windows. In one corner of the court was stretched a clothesline with women's clothes hanging on it. Asleep on the stone-flags was a small dog with a fine coat.

He was so intent drinking in this scene that an exclamation immediately below him nearly made him loosen his grip and fall. With his mouth wide open and his face very red he glanced down. It was a girl.

She made a step or two as if she were going

to call some one. But almost at once she changed her mind and exclaimed irately:

“What are you doing up there, ill-educated boy?”

At that he was covered with confusion: the power of speech almost left him. He said lamely enough:

“There was a little bird on this tree hopping about in the branches. I had observed it two or three times before and tonight I determined to catch it, hoping that it was too young to fly and had fallen from the nest above. It was not an easy matter.”

He pointed with a hand upwards to a nest; then he let go both hands from the tree, holding on with his knees in a spirit of bravado.

“A small bird!” echoed the girl. “Where is it — show it to me. I walk here every day and never have I observed it.”

“*Fei-la* — it has flown,” he answered abruptly. “My supposition was incorrect. Evidently it was sufficiently grown to fly. It is very difficult to judge birds at this season.”

“Up there was it that you saw it?” queried

the girl again with persistence because she was a woman.

"Yes, in the tree," answered Wang the Ninth rather rudely. Then something prompted him to laugh suddenly in his spontaneous way.

"What I have just told you is not true, at least not entirely," he remarked, picking at the bark with his fingers. "Evidently there are birds in all trees where there are nests — but I myself came to look over the wall."

Below an exclamation.

"To look over the wall! That is not a good business. You will surely be beaten if you are caught. This indeed is an impudent boy. But why did you wish to look over?"

"Because for many days I had observed the small door and was unable to understand why it was locked."

Again the girl gave an exclamation.

"Certainly will you be beaten if you are caught. Go quickly. My grandfather is the steward — has no one told you? But what do you do in the house?"

"I am in the stables."

"Now I know. You are the one they call the little wine-smuggler. Certainly you climb well enough for that. But if you practise this sort of thing you will inevitably suffer."

At that the boy said rather glumly in a sort of monologue: "They attach that name to me for motives of jealousy because they fear that the master may unduly favour me. In any case I only smuggled for a month or so. There was nothing particular in what I did. I have never defrauded others. From the stables there is a constant removal of grain: all share in this dishonesty, and yet they do not hesitate to make unjust remarks about myself."

He was distinctly angry. Something in him rebelled at the fact that a stranger and a woman should know him by a nasty nickname. He felt humiliated. And inclination came over him to slide down the tree without another word. But just then the girl asked:

"Will you risk climbing up again?"

He shook his head.

"It seems a stupid business. I hear nothing good about myself when I do. And there is always the danger of punishment."

Then there was silence. Above the blue-black sky had lost its last hint of orange and yellow. Night was fast coming on in this land of no twilight. Within a few minutes it would be pitch-dark.

“The other side is less dangerous,” said the girl, suddenly pointing to the north. “You can reach it by going round the outhouse where the plants are kept.”

He looked at her in amazement, not understanding why such a remark had been made. Then, after a long pause, he began to slide down ever so slowly, stopping every few inches as if he did not know what to do.

“Well, perhaps I shall try it — who knows. In a day or two, but not at once as I must study the ground.”

With this odd good-bye he slid very rapidly out of sight, and landed on the ground with a clean jump.

In less than two minutes he had loafed back into his quarters looking slily round to see whether his absence had been observed.

CHAPTER XI

IT was more than a day or two before he put into execution the plan suggested to him in such an unexpected manner. What alone fascinated him was the unknown. Like all his race, he was inherently inquisitive and full of the spirit of research into the causes of facts and events which were new to him. But a mystery solved was a last season's novelty — something which it was hardly worth bothering about.

So he sat in the dusk, when his work was over, with his bird-cage in his hand trying to teach his mynah to talk as the others did, and not thinking of much else. But the bird had become stupid, and the half-formed words he thought he had once caught were no longer to be heard. He was anxious to have a talking bird, for every one knew it was possible to teach some birds to talk if you showed patience and tact. Suddenly one evening he tired of the pastime. He remembered the door that had puzzled him, and cage in hand he sauntered very indifferently to the

spot indicated to him. With the long curved copper-hook of his cage firmly grasped in his mouth, he at length swarmed up the outhouse, making a great noise in the process, but getting himself soon enough astride of the compound wall.

In the little courtyard below him there was no one to be seen. He could not see a single shadow or a single movement behind the latticed windows, and he quickly imagined that every one had gone out.

He sat surveying this silence for some time, humming to himself mechanically. At this hour just before dusk the world was always very quiet and peaceful. All work was over. Men and women far and wide were gossiping and passive, the squabbles and bickerings of the day forgotten. As he sat with his feet comfortably pulled up under him, he finally fell into a brown study from which he was brought by a laugh. He looked to the right, he looked to the left; but after scanning every possible hiding-place, he could detect no movement.

"This is an odd thing," he exclaimed aloud. "Who is it that laughed?"

Again there was the same amused noise. Thoroughly puzzled, he forgot his caution. Standing boldly upright, he commenced walking along the top of the high wall, swinging his bird-cage in his hand and studying the courtyard below him closely. His trim little figure stood out against the skyline in such a way that he could be seen at a great distance. So absorbed had he become that he entirely forgot his whereabouts. But suddenly he was aroused by a shout and a voice that he greatly feared.

It was the Buffalo — the steward — who had seen him. That he knew without turning round. For a moment he nearly gave way to an inclination to bolt. Then his inherent pride asserted itself, and without flinching he turned round.

“Little toad,” called the steward angrily in his big raw voice as he waddled through the bushes towards him. “Who gave you permission to go up there? How many times have you been warned that if you break orders you would be dismissed?”

“I know,” he confessed in apparent humility. “But my bird flew from its cage owing to my carelessness in leaving the door open. After

chasing it everywhere it finally took refuge up here and the only way to catch it was to clamber after it. No harm has been done, however, and now my bird is safe."

He swung his cage in the air as if in proof of his assertion.

"Who cares whether your bird flew away or not!" retorted the steward angrily, puffing for breath. "Often have I told you that disobedience entails punishment. *Hsia lai* (come down) that I may beat you."

Now he flourished a piece of bamboo he had picked up, and stood immediately beneath the wall in a posture of exaggerated rage. To the boy the prospect suddenly became forbidding and his confidence began to desert him.

"It is not easy to come down," he said, temporizing and wondering how he should escape. "If I slip here I shall hurt myself in the fall and besides there is my bird to think of."

He scratched his head in his dilemma, hating to surrender. Of course he could run along the wall until he came to a place where he could drop to the ground far from the old man, and then his swiftness of foot would save him. But

breaking-off this parley would mean that he had burnt his boats. No Chinese, young or old, ever closes the door on compromise. That is quite certain.

He hunted round quickly with his eyes. Just then to his amazement in the little courtyard, on the other side of the wall, he saw the girl appear from behind a huge earthenware pot containing water-lilies. She had been crouching there all this while. And seeing that he had seen her, she signed to him vigorously to keep silence.

"*Yeh-yeh*," she called from behind the wall to the steward who could not see her. Wang the Ninth, turning his head first in one direction and then in another, noted that the old man's manner instantly changed.

"Yes, yes," he said hurriedly, glancing over his shoulder to see that nobody was overhearing them. "What can I do?"

"Listen," called the girl over the wall to him. "Do not trouble about this boy. It is a small affair. He is doing no wrong. He would only show me the bird which I told him to do some days ago."

"Still if the master saw him," returned the steward doubtfully.

"It is my wish," responded the girl.

There was a moment's dead silence. Then, with something muttered under his breath, the old man shuffled away.

Wang the Ninth stood with his mouth wide open from amazement. He watched the old man retreat out of sight as if the most surprising thing in the world had taken place; and then, when he was sure that it was really true, words poured from his mouth.

"He listens to you!" he exclaimed blankly. "Not a word does he dare to say in reply. He just listens. Well, well," he ended, waggishly shaking his head. "Here is the strangest thing that ever happened—a man who obeys a woman."

Now admiration crept into his looks. He looked down at the girl in such a frankly approving way that she was a little nonplussed. The mastery she had displayed was something entirely novel to him, for the idea that a man might have to take orders from a woman had never

occurred to him before. In his world the women slaved and worked and rarely rebelled save over money-matters or owing to quarrels among themselves. They were obedient. They only commanded their children — never grown men.

“Well, well,” he confessed as he ruminated over this new knowledge. “Now my alarm is all gone. If he dares to beat me I shall make a frank statement to every one.”

“He will do nothing,” replied the girl, “and it is better that you should not speak. Speaking is quite unnecessary.”

He nodded his head as if in approval of such sentiments. He was not an apostle of communicativeness except as a last resort. Sitting on the wall in a debonnair way, he took seeds from a little tin box he had hidden in his tunic, and releasing his bird cast them up in the air one by one. The mynah, with the regularity and sureness of long training, caught each one unfailingly — finally coming to rest on the boy’s hand. An admiring comment greeted these efforts.

“Oh, this is nothing,” he remarked. “Some are trained to such perfection that they not only fly but talk.”

"Talk," she echoed incredulously.

"Yes, it is even so," he rejoined, anxious to show his superior knowledge. "There are some persons who have such power that they can understand the talk of even untrained birds."

"That is impossible," the girl objected.

"I can tell you a story that proves it," he declared, and swinging his legs he began a well-known story which he had heard from the storytellers at the tea-houses again and again.

"There was once an old Taoist priest who used to live by begging in a village. Everybody gave him according to their means, so the priest felt under a great obligation to them all. One day he suddenly warned them that they had better be careful about fire, and the story so alarmed them all that a number of them went and inquired what he meant.

"'Well,' he said, 'I happened to overhear an oriole who was preening himself on a tree remark repeatedly: "Look out, a big fire: rescue will be difficult. It will be very alarming."'

"The country people on hearing this story were not at all impressed. They went away saying that this was indeed a crazy old priest to

whom no serious attention should be paid. Yet on the very next day somebody was careless with a candle and a conflagration was started which destroyed half the village. After that every one believed that the priest was endowed with supernatural powers, but when they went to look for him he had gone far away. A number of men, however, went in pursuit and finally overtook him many miles away. Forthwith they dragged him back to the village, every one greeting him as a dealer in magic and reviling him.

“‘Who’s a magician?’ retorted the priest, nowise disconcerted. ‘It’s only that I understand the language of birds, that’s all.’

“Just as he was speaking the chirping of a small bird was heard in a tree, so they all asked the priest:

“‘Listen to the bird; what is he saying?’

“‘What this bird says,’ replied the priest, ‘is as follows: “Sixth day of the month give birth, sixth day of the month give birth; fourteenth, fifteenth injure.” Now this means that in some family twins were born on the 6th day. Today is the 10th and before five more days have passed both will die. If you don’t believe this

what objection is there to your going and inquiring?’

“So the people went and inquired. And it was found that twins had actually been born in the village on the 6th day and both died within five days.

“Now the fame of this prediction passed round the district and eventually reached the ears of the sub-prefect. When the sub-prefect heard that there was a man who could understand the language of birds, it struck him as being a great novelty, so he sent an official messenger to invite the old priest to his residence. Whilst he was sitting there in the library it happened that a flock of ducks passed by outside quacking loudly and freely. The sub-prefect asked at once what the ducks were saying.

“‘There is a quarrel going on in Your Honour’s house,’ replied the priest. ‘And the ducks say *pa, pa!* that will do, that will do; he favours her, he favours her.’

“Now when the sub-prefect heard this he was overcome with astonishment and thoroughly believed in the priest’s powers. This sub-prefect had two wives, a senior long wedded to him, and

a young concubine. The elder had a slight tendency towards jealousy, and though she did not let it be shown, she used to discipline the young one every day. The young woman, having gained great favour in the eyes of her master, did not submit tamely to the control of the older one, so the result was that there were constant bickerings and quarrels. Invariably the sub-prefect took the side of his favourite, with the consequence that the older woman got angrier every day. It is not known what had offended the senior wife that day, but in any case the two women were involved in a dispute which it was difficult to settle, and so the old priest having hit the nail on the head accurately pleased the sub-prefect immensely, so much so that he kept the priest in his yamen and treated him very well. Whenever he asked what the birds were saying, the priest would give an explanation and he was always correct in every particular. There was one objectionable point, however. The priest was a bit rough in his talk and no matter what the subject might be, whenever he opened his mouth to say anything there was no reserve whatever about his remarks.

"This sub-prefect was a man of a very covetous disposition and in all matters connected with the supplies of his yamen he forced the people to commute their obligations into cash payments.

"One day when the sub-prefect was sitting chatting with the priest, they again saw the flock of ducks coming waddling and quacking along. 'What do they say this time?' asked the sub-prefect. 'This time,' replied the priest, 'their remarks are very different from those on the previous occasion. This time they are chatting about Your Honour's miscellaneous accounts.'

"'What miscellaneous account of mine?' asked the sub-prefect. 'What they are calling is "Commute it, commute it, candle-money a hundred and eight, vermilion-money eight *tiao* eight,"' replied the priest. The sub-prefect was so ashamed that his face got red all over, and he suspected the priest of intentionally jesting. But he took no notice of his remark and the matter passed over. On the next day the priest wanted to go, but the sub-prefect persisted in keeping him and would not let him leave. After a few more days had passed the sub-prefect had

a party in the summer-house in his garden, and they suddenly heard a small bird that was perched upon a tree begin to chirp. One of the guests at the table said, 'Do you hear this bird? What does he say?' 'This bird,' said the priest, 'is saying something not very nice. He says "lose office go."'

"When the guests who were present heard these words of the priest there was not one of them that was not startled, but the sub-prefect got into a great rage and ordered his underlings to drive the crazy priest out of the yamen. Not many days afterwards, however, the sub-prefect was dismissed from office for corruption and bribery and on his record was it written that he was never to be employed again. Thus was the priest vindicated and his powers fully proved."

Wang the Ninth ended his story earnestly and seriously, believing that it was true.

"You are a fine story-teller," commented the girl, nodding her head repeatedly. "What a pity it is that you do not adopt it as a profession when you are fully-grown."

He shook his head.

"I have no kind of learning, only a ready

memory for names and things. It is possible that in the account I gave you of the Taoist priest I made mistakes which would have brought laughter from those who are skilled in the telling of tales. The slightest deviation is counted a fault."

Later, he swung lightly off the wall with a farewell nod and was lost to view. He was not many days older when he overheard a neighbour casually saying that the reason the old steward showed such caution regarding his grand-child was because his master did not know how from his profits he had not only purchased this adjacent house but several others near by for the purpose of selling to new foreigners as they came. To the boy's surprise, the neighbour called the girl *sha-ta-ku-niang*,—Miss Simpleton. She was a simpleton and he had never guessed it—in spite of her hiding behind the great jar of water-lilies.

That obtuseness on his part deeply humiliated him.

CHAPTER XII

THE revelation of profit-taking, which grew out of his chance adventure, was, however, the matter which most deeply impressed him. He had never conceived of earning-power so high among servants as to permit of houses being purchased.

“His profit can indeed not be small,” he said to himself many times as he thought about the matter. Now he addressed the steward with a respect which had previously been lacking. He was a man so skilful with his miscellaneous accounts that from his unearned increment he did all things that he willed. “Certainly there is great waste in this household if those who serve grow rich,” thought the boy very often.

Being the youngest in the household he was every man’s slave, a condition he accepted as natural enough. Even those in the kitchen got him sometimes to fetch and carry, which he did not mind, since they always regaled him with food; and for food he would perjure his soul.

It took him many months completely to satisfy his desire for mutton — simply because that had been so beyond his reach when his only knowledge of it was the sight of the big quarters hanging in the Mohammedan meat-shops. As for pork he was able to get that once or twice a week with his ordinary rations. For although the head-groom divided nothing among his mates from his percentages from the grain-dealers, it was unwritten law that he should treat his assistants to meat so as to keep their tempers sweet and their tongues from blabbing. In this way Wang the Ninth soon had every one's measure. He knew how much or how little each was worth, morally as well as otherwise.

One afternoon the head-groom, being in want of a companion, proposed that he should accompany him to a Fair. There were few things he loved more than the noise and excitement of moving crowds, and as for money he always made a loan from the person with whom he happened to be. So eating sugared crab-apples stuck on a bamboo-stick, he sauntered along making comments which showed shrewdness and humour. There were many fine things for sale at the Fair

at booths set up by shop-keepers who were not above using such opportunities to display their best wares on common board tables. Little crowds followed the wealthy and watched them buy, finding satisfaction in witnessing the handling of money even if they had none to spend themselves.

"Those who are rich and those who are poor are all out today," remarked the boy in his loud, unconcerned way. "All indeed are out sight-seeing. It is pleasant here."

The head-groom, smoking a cigarette through an imitation amber-holder, and giving himself up thoroughly to the pleasure of loafing in the sunlight, agreed with him.

"Nevertheless," he reflected after a pause, "when one goes to see *je-nao* (festivities) it only means two things: that one returns home tired and that a good deal of foolish expenditure has been made."

"Still it is possible to recoup that," rejoined the boy slyly. "That is when one has chances as well as the regular wages that foreigners pay."

The head-groom, being in a good humour, only laughed.

“Prices have risen too high in this city for there to be the profits that were once possible. Still so long as one has food to eat why should one complain —”

“*Tui-la* — it is even so,” agreed the boy. “Let us be happy while we may.”

They wandered on gossiping in this way after the manner of the country, and presently came to a wine-booth where there had been a good deal of bibbling. Two or three men loafing there had flushed faces.

“This indeed is one of those ne’er-do-well boys who has sold himself to a foreigner,” remarked one of them contemptuously. “He wears an old pair of foreign boots his master has thrown to him and doubtless other things he has picked up. Rigorous measures ought to be adopted against such as he.”

Wang the Ninth coloured with rage. He had thought very highly of himself with a skull-cap of brown felt perched on one ear and the afore-said foreign boots on his feet, not to speak of a pair of blue socks the washerman had let him have only two days before. But being skilled from his long vagabond life in the art of picking

a quarrel so that the fault lies with the other man, he pretended to disregard the remark. When the memory of it had faded from the minds of those around him, suddenly and very dramatically he clapped his hand to his girdle and gave vent to a loud cry.

"What's the matter?" said the head-groom really startled.

Wang the Ninth pretended to be so absorbed that he could not speak. He fussed with his girdle, muttering all the while, and consuming much time before he made his meaning clear. But finally he drew out his little cloth money-wallet, as if he had discovered it by the purest chance.

"It's nothing — fortunately," he said with a big sigh. "For an instant I thought my money had been taken. We were in such close proximity to disreputable-looking fellows in greasy coats that it looked bad. But luck has been in my favour; and my purse is still there."

Now the man who had made the disparaging remark had on a greasy coat and so had his fellows; and at the obvious insinuation it was

their turn to become furious. One grabbed Wang the Ninth by the arm.

"Look here," he said threateningly. "A dangerous moment is coming for you."

The boy shook him off with a swift furious movement.

"What have you got to do with me and what have I to do with you?" he inquired equally threateningly. "This is the first time I have laid eyes upon you — and I hope it will be the last for you are unpleasant to look upon and seem as if you slept with candles as bedfellows."

At that there was a roar of laughter from the crowd. Scenting a row, every one pressed closely on the disputants. Wang the Ninth, his eyes dancing with excitement, and satisfied by the manner he had turned the tables on the others, pushed the advantage he had gained — and began what is always effective among his countrymen — a public explanation.

"I was standing here innocently with my senior," he declared, pointing to the head-groom, "when I thought I missed my purse and cried out. Fortunately I was mistaken. But merely

because I voiced my suspicions these ugly fellows wish to set upon me. Things have come to a fine pass when one's talk is supervised by any one who happens to be standing near."

Expressions of sympathy greeted this outburst.

"Leave the boy alone — go your way — what have you to do with him?" — such were the style of comments made. Wang the Ninth, because he was triumphant, struck again.

"All is well — all is well," he remarked conversationally as if excusing the commotion. "Further comment is unnecessary. I have been lucky in the matter of my purse which is a humble affair. But those who are better furnished had best have a care and stand back."

At the warning people began to move on, and Wang the Ninth moved off, too, looking back at the men who were swearing and being restrained only with difficulty from following and attacking him.

"Was that laughable or not?" he said to the head-groom when they were out of earshot. "When street-fellows tackle me they get back a kind of talk they understand. Rude talk for

those in foreign employment cannot be tolerated."

"It has always been like that," rejoined the head-groom. "When I first entered service twenty years ago I was smaller than you, and the difficulties were greater. It was necessary to remove all trace of foreign things before going around the city. As for riding on foreign saddles unaccompanied by one's master that was impossible."

"It is jealousy rather than suspicion which attaches to us," reflected Wang the Ninth. "Among the Southern people it is said to be different, but here it would be easy to become involved in great difficulties."

From this incident the boy understood that if he identified himself with foreigners to the extent of eating their rice, he must share their trials. He was enfolded in a discipline and in customs different from those of his own people. But to him it seemed good because there was no want. Now that he was on a regular salary and allowed to ride a horse he did not care about the rest.

Sometimes he sat around and argued keenly

with his fellows on this problem as he saw it. It attracted his active mind and greatly puzzled him.

"It is not only that their customs are different," he declared. "With them the family is different. See how many live unattached and alone. Also they have many conveniences, which make matters better regulated."

"There is less idleness among those who could be idle — that is how I measure it," affirmed the head-groom. "Among our people who are rich there is no desire to move or to seek distraction by travel. All time is consumed at home or in eating-houses. There are few who are rich who have not several wives. This is the explanation."

"Yet," objected the boy, "it is not the explanation. For what you say only applies to one category of our people. With those who work there are not these differences."

"Those of our people who have no learning follow those who have," replied the head-groom. "This is why scholarship is held in high consideration: it gives precept and guidance. Our book-learning is different from that of the

foreigners. It takes no account of the things they study. Therefore there is opposition between the two. That is the second explanation."

"There is much convenience in many foreign matters," reflected the boy. "The foreign house — which is built up high, is convenient. If that were done by our people how much more accommodation would be secured."

"With us it is impossible," said the headgroom. "No roof may be higher than the Emperor's. By building their houses of religion higher than the Emperor's Palace the foreigners first incurred hatred. You do not know of these matters. I have been told about them by our scholars."

Thus did they argue from day to day, seeing matters from a standpoint only to be understood by their daily lives.

CHAPTER XIII

SO two winters passed and the boy grew. He was wandering about one of the market-places when he caught his first glimpse of the thing which brought the great crisis in his life and fulfilled his destiny. A crowd had gathered in one corner, and was increasing with such rapidity that it was impossible even to guess what they were looking at. By dint of wriggling and pushing, he finally managed to work his way through and see what was causing the excitement.

In a small open space, a youth of about his age and size, stripped to the waist, was standing in the rigid posture adopted by native athletes before they do some feat of skill. But it was not this which attracted the crowd: it was the fact that he had grasped in his hands a naked sword which he held within two inches of his eyes. Staring at the glittering edge with savage intentness he muttered a stream of unintelligible

words, which fell from his lips rhythmically as in an incantation.

In the midst of the deepest silence the people watched with awe-struck looks, no man moving. Gradually the boy's face was assuming an ashen hue. The intensity of his stare was such that the glittering sword hypnotized him. Now he began to sway rhythmically; his lips gradually ceased moving, and the heavy sword trembled and swung in his hands. Sheer will-power held him to the ordeal. Then the appointed end came with dramatic suddenness. With a lurch he fell stiff and rigid to the ground. There he lay insensible, his mouth wide open as if uttering a soundless scream.

"What is it?" whispered Wang the Ninth under his breath to his nearest neighbour, a butcher with the leather apron of his trade still attached to him.

The man looked down at him in a troubled way.

"*I-ho-ch'uan*, the Sword Society," he said abruptly.

A confederate of the boy, who had been standing to one side, now approached. Quickly pick-

ing up the fallen sword, he stabbed the boy in the muscles of the arm as he lay there. There was no blood.

“Bear witness,” he exclaimed in a thick voice, waving the sword defiantly. “All who embrace the belief need fear no guns or swords.”

He swung round to show his red girdle and the amulet on his chest. Necks were craned; no eye missed these details. These were the insignia which soon were to cause an ancient dynasty to totter to its grave.

On the ground the neophyte lay steeped in the deepest unconsciousness. The crowd had reached the greatest proportions. Packed suffocatingly together, they watched every gesture and every development, chained to the spot by a subtle hysterical impulse. A keen observer might have said that they had long been waiting for this message. Wang the Ninth stood like the rest consumed with curiosity, until suddenly the neophyte on the ground slightly stirred. Now his eyes opened; he raised himself with a start; and then suddenly sprang to his feet as if possessed. He made a number of dramatic

athletic gestures, as his leader touched him on the arm.

"I am born anew," he exclaimed loudly. "My body has received a spirit. I go to the Temple to receive my new name." Then, before most of them could see what had happened, the men with the blood-girdles, had forced a passage through the crowd, taking the neophyte with them to the Temple to receive his baptism.

That night in the stables Wang the Ninth sat up very late telling his mates what he had seen, and indulging in pantomime to demonstrate exactly what had taken place. The rites had strangely impressed him.

"The sword is held close to the eyes like that," he said, showing them with a stick. "Certain powers are given: otherwise how comes it that the sword draws no blood?"

The others had nothing to say. They were like children confronted by the unknown. They were mystified, and attracted as well. Yet all sensed danger; in their rough way they declared it "was not a good business," particularly for those in foreign employ.

The next day, at the first idle moment, they all sallied out to see if there would be any repetition of the demonstration. All in the foreign quarter were talking of the matter; for many foreigners' servants had witnessed what had taken place the previous day and were also dimly disturbed. But to their relief they learnt that the matter had been reported to the authorities, and that fearing disturbances the new brotherhood had been warned to keep outside the city limits. They were now practising, it was said, on the sands outside the city walls.

For some days nothing happened and the idle talk began to die down. Then one afternoon all the stable-hands were requisitioned to ride with their master; and Wang the Ninth went to riding a white pony.

They sallied out of the city after their wont in a compact body. That day it was the master's whim to ride far and wide—into the country where a whole valley is given up to the walled burial-places of princes and other great dead. It was evening ere they turned back, the master leading the way home on his big black horse.

Just outside one of the city gates they came on

a group of men standing in a little knot. They had a banner with them stuck in the ground. Wang the Ninth instantly recognized what it was.

"The new Brotherhood," he called so excitedly that the master heard him and reined in.

"Where?" he began in the vernacular, although the question was unnecessary. For the men had caught sight of him, and were roundly and bitterly cursing him as a foreign devil who merited death.

Without a word he rode slowly up to them. A youth with a sword in his hand had just commenced the posturing and the incantations, but something made him stop and watch the oncoming horseman as the others were doing. Without a word or an indication of his proposed action, the red-bearded master rode slowly towards the group who no longer dared to curse. When he was a few yards away, he suddenly drove his heels into his horse and was down on them before they knew what had happened. The lash of his mighty hunting-crop whistled through the air and caught the boy stripped to the waist, leaving a blood-red weal which made him shriek.

Now as they fled he pursued them, lashing until he was exhausted. Then, slowly he rejoined his own people, who had not stirred or uttered a word.

"It will come," he said, breathing heavily from his exertions. "It will come; it will come everywhere—it will infect the whole city. I who have lived here long know." Then without further ado he resumed his way home as if nothing had happened.

This episode was more exciting to Wang the Ninth than his first initiation had been.

"The master is a man," he said that evening gleefully again and again. "He will not be afraid. And I who serve him am not afraid either."

Still fear came into the city gates very soon after that. It slipped in mysteriously just as the first practisers of the strange rites had come. A vague and curious blanket of apprehension settled visibly on every one, and made men afraid to look their fellows in the face. For once in their lives their garrulous tongues were stilled, and they sat waiting in silence. It was one of

the most curious phenomena which has ever been seen — quite inexplicable save on the ground that certain processes of the human mind, which are common to us all, are sometimes induced in such powerful waves that none are capable of resisting them. The development of the drama was taking place as it were behind the scenes, yet understood by everybody. A million people in the capital waited obediently like hostages to learn their fate.

One morning it was reported that carts full of swords had passed in through the city gates with inscriptions boldly displayed on banners in blood-red characters. The city guards had not dared to interfere, the scattered crowd following the carts full of awe as though they were tumbrils bearing condemned men to the gallows. It was generally seen and noted how this curious convoy made its way to a big Temple, disappearing inside and giving no clue as to what was to follow.

The sight of those great stacks of swords redoubled all fears. But who was to do anything? There was the emperor and all his ministers in-

side the great Palace to govern the land; for the common people there was nothing to do but to tremble and submit.

Yet even these developments were distant and irrelevant compared with what Wang the Ninth saw going on around him. He was filled with surprise and suspicion. For his fellow-servants no longer wore anything foreign—they had carefully removed everything that might indicate that they were in foreign service. With his quick eyes he noticed not only what they did openly, but what they wished to conceal. Being wise beyond his years he said nothing but watched everybody and everything in the compound with the eyes of a hawk.

Just as this critical moment, a development took place which shook even his great self-confidence. Being sent on an errand far beyond the foreign quarter, he deliberately dressed himself up in his foreign boots and gaiters, and put on his head an old felt hat which was the common property of the stable. He was not a quarter of a mile away from his master's house when without notice his hat was struck off his head and he was hustled out of the way. Then a cry

arose which was repeated from mouth to mouth in a parrot-like way, and which so strangely affected him that his wits deserted him. He was called a *san-mao-tzu*, a third category foreigner — *i. e.*, one who eats foreign rice. He felt he was surrounded by something worse than anger — something too big to be swept aside by retorts. When he made his way home, his spirit of bravado had utterly disappeared.

He asked at once to be admitted to the master's presence, saying that he had an important story to tell. The old steward consented without discussion — a thing he would never have done if the world had not been so upside down. The boy went in breathless and standing there told the master exactly what had taken place so that the warning should be understood.

His red-bearded master leaned back in his chair and watched him reflectively. The boy was surprised to see that his master's bright red hair was shot with grey.

"And were you afraid?" he asked slowly and deliberately.

The boy hesitated and then shook his head.

"It was not fear that I felt," he said in his

frank, rough vernacular. "Yet it is troubling, to come so suddenly and for no reason. The others had removed everything that might give cause for offence. Even watches, it is said, are considered dangerous. But I had not believed it. It is a new thing — and some say that it will be necessary for all of us to go —"

His master sat immersed in thought. Then he asked:

"And you, will you follow the example of the others?"

Wang the Ninth felt that his reputation was at stake. Still there was no doubt or hesitation in his reply:

"How can I forget that Your Honour's house gave me employment and food when I was in want? Whither should I flee even if there were the great danger since I am without parents?"

The master looked at him with approval.

"Show caution," he remarked. "It is wise to show caution now —"

Outside the house Wang the Ninth found all the servants already gathered together discussing what had happened.

"*San-mao-tzu* — third-class barbarians," they repeated sullenly. "This is a nice business for us who only earn a bare living."

They were plainly frightened. Those who had wives and children in distant parts of the city spoke of the necessity of going. If this suspense continued, the majority would certainly flee. Only the men from the South would not move. For they were strangers, too, that is quasi-foreigners, who feared the mob because of their different speech.

Presently, in a day or two, some foreign soldiers arrived. But there were not many. It was said that thousands might soon come. That night, however, a secret exodus began from all native households scattered throughout the foreign quarter. In carts and on foot the people hastened silently away, abandoning their homes because of their location. The foreigner was becoming accursed — it was not good to continue living near him. The sombre depression grew as before a great disaster. A sudden noise would make every one cease work to see what had happened. Discipline was so relaxed that

Wang the Ninth was permitted to go and come as he chose, even the head-groom never chiding him. So the thing developed, slowly yet rather fast, the elements of evil gathering from afar under cover of the dark.

CHAPTER XIV

ONE night a great, sullen roar reached him through the open stable-doors in confused waves of sound which ebbed and flowed as though some monster were being tortured in fits and starts.

Full of awe he lay listening. On the cobblestones outside he could hear his mates stirring uneasily. They were talking to one another in low, guttural voices that were impossible to understand. In his drowsy state he only paid vague attention to them. Then, just as his sleepiness was conquering him, words reached him which shot him to his feet as if they had been a loud explosion.

"*Chao huo*, (Fire) " one of them had called.

Nothing can exceed the dread in which the fire-demon is held in the East. Whether it is merely a fear, natural enough in lands where destruction is always absolute and irreparable, is uncertain — but what is incontestable is that

conflagrations inspire horror from one end of Asia to the other.

Wang the Ninth had rushed outside.

"Where is it?" he called in his shrill voice, stumbling forward in the dark.

But the man had already disappeared. As he halted there irresolutely, a glare on the dark horizon caught his attention.

Even as he looked the light grew magically. It spread in a fan of red and yellow across the skies, making mysterious effects on the dark night clouds which seemed to become living things like wrathful dragons. Now the distant cries swelled to a veritable storm which was borne to him like a call for help.

His quick mind instantly leaped to the conclusion that this was incendiarism; it could only be the torch that carried the flames to so many points at once, and then joined them together into such a vast circle of dancing light. He ran through the darkness to the gatehouse to seek companionship.

The Mohammedan gatekeeper was standing at the gates which had been thrown wide-open; and already a large company of his neighbours had

collected there. They were women and babies, and weeping children — all dragged to the gate-house of a foreigner because that seemed to promise protection. Awe-stricken stories passed from mouth to mouth; there was enough to learn to keep the boy listening until dawn.

The Sword-Society — everybody said that they were at work. They had descended on the outer city in their thousands and were setting fire to the shops after they had looted to their fill. Far more awful things would soon occur. No one dared to stir. Every mind was only occupied with the question of personal safety.

“But the foreigners won’t let them bring harm in here,” protested Wang the Ninth at last. “They will shoot them down; if you do not hear firing very shortly it will be strange.”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” rejoined the refugees. “But they will look after themselves first and who knows how long they will remain to protect us. Tonight is unimportant: it is only the beginning. We shall be left behind. What will be our lot then?”

A murmur of commiseration greeted this.

“I am not afraid,” protested the boy defiantly.

"I have eaten foreign rice and I shall remain. It will not be as you think. There will be new things — many foreign soldiers will come."

He asked a question of the gatekeeper.

"I go to the city wall too," he exclaimed, "to see what there is to see."

And now he started off at a run.

"There goes one who thinks that the foreigner can accomplish all things," grumbled the gatekeeper. "There is not a thing they do that he does not think excellent and yet he has been here but a very short while. Less than two years ago at the time of the winter festival he came seeking work; and when our master gave it to him he became for him as his father."

But the object of these remarks was far away. Like a dog following up some scent, and wholly absorbed in what he was doing, the boy had run on.

The nearer he came to the city wall the brighter was the glare. It was indeed so bright that it was now possible to see every object around him. People were peering out of doorways and called to him repeatedly for information, but he ran on.

Up the broad ramp of the city wall he ran and then in the direction of the great tower which crowned the central entrance. He knew that there was where the foreigners would go because there it was possible to see most. Now as he came nearer to this point, the magnificence of the spectacle greatly impressed him.

"It is unbelievable," he murmured.

It was indeed unbelievable. From this vantage-point it seemed as if half the city were in flames—the flames now seemed to extend for miles. Choking clouds of smoke were wafted up to him full of sparks. It became difficult to breathe; and it was clear that had it not been for the great moat and this massive wall, the foreign quarter would already have been in flames like the rest. With his head down and his heart thumping hard the boy ran on until he came upon a large crowd of foreigners.

"I seek my master," he explained, using his Chinese name.

"Over there," they waved to him.

He recognized his master from his great bulk. He was standing before a knot of armed native

soldiers. As he came up he caught the master's last words.

. . . "So long as the gates are kept shut no harm can come. But if they are opened even though it be for a tenth of a minute, you as well as every one else will suffer and lose your lives."

In a chorus the guards rejoined:

"We understand, your Excellency. It is as you say."

Then they broke off. For immediately beneath them came a fiendish yelling from countless throats.

"Open the gates, open the gates."

From out of the smoke and flames, the madened desperadoes chorussed this dirge.

"Open the gates, open the gates," they cried ceaselessly and imperatively.

Wang the Ninth crept to the parapet, and thrusting his head through an embrasure gazed out.

Lit up by the flames, great dark patches of men could be seen standing there gesticulating and shouting madly to the accompaniment of the crackling flames. Sometimes as the rafters of some burning emporium fell in, an enormous

cloud of sparks was wafted into the air and fell about them, sending up glints from their swords and spears which they shook and waved.

“Open the gates; open the gates.”

So it went on for very long. The master's voice, sounding at his very elbow, brought him out of his absorption.

“Well — what do you think of it?”

“They are dogs,” said the boy contemptuously. “It is best to shoot them all — Dogs,” he cried in his shrill voice, displacing a small piece of brick and hurling it down.

His master shook his head.

“There is no one to deal with them, no one to shoot.”

So they remained watching. At last exhausted by their efforts, the great mob gradually ceased their crying. Deep silence ensued, only occasionally interrupted by some loud explosion in the distance as a roof fell in.

CHAPTER XV

DEEP calm followed that night. It was so calm the next morning that it seemed unnatural. Hardly a soul was abroad in the foreign quarter; and apart from some dozing foreign sentries at the street-corners, the whole neighbourhood seemed deserted — particularly that broad leafy thoroughfare called in the vernacular “The People’s Communication,” along which were grouped the foreigners’ houses.

A great exodus of the inhabitants had indeed taken place during the hours after dawn; and even now it was possible in the side-lanes to see the last little groups of blue-coated people slinking away — determined to seek safety no matter how far they had to go. The foreigner was all very well in times of peace. He was a good paymaster and worth cultivating. But in the face of murder and outrage, money lost its value, and safety was the only consideration.

Wang the Ninth, after a short troubled sleep,

had gone out and picked up these facts for himself. By his system of gossiping with all and sundry, he knew in a few minutes everything that had taken place. Marvellous tales were recounted to him, gross and palpable exaggerations all cast in the same mould of fear. . . . And yet these are the things people believe in times of excitement, and he believed them too. At last having exhausted the subject he returned home, only to find that all his mates, excepting one, had deserted the stables during his absence.

He stood dumbfounded for quite a minute by this development.

"Here's a nice business," he remarked aloud, scratching his ugly face thoughtfully and coiling up his little queue tightly round his head as a sign that he was going to set to work. "We have nine ponies and there are two of us left. Where have these eaters of foreign rice gone?"

The remaining man said nothing. He went on morosely sweeping the cobblestones. It was only the fact that he came from a distant province that had prevented him from running at once. But he was meditating flight as he worked — that was plain.

The boy, reading these things in his sullenness, eyed him distastefully.

"Tomorrow, if not before, I shall be alone," he announced, "Well, I shall be the senior then, with no small-hearted fellows to show how much fear there is about."

The man took a step in his direction.

"What do you mean?" he blurted out, making a threatening gesture.

For reply the boy coolly picked up a pitchfork, and assumed a defiant attitude. He was nearly sixteen now, and although small was muscular and as quick as lightning.

"What is your Honourable intention?" he inquired mockingly, making a thrust or two in the air in the manner of native gymnasts as if he proposed to impale his adversary. "Do you wish to fight?"

The man eyed him for a few seconds. Then, in the face of this determined attitude, he retreated, cursing his opponent under his breath. Wang the Ninth threw down his pitchfork and went on with his work.

"A dog like the rest," he remarked, now

thoroughly aroused. "He will disappear too. Who cares! Look here — you fellow — come near me again and I will hurl a brick in your face. Such as you are not required — your places will be filled when the appointed hour comes."

He began mixing the feed in basket after basket with the skill of long practice. The ponies, tied to a long rope stretched across the stable-yard, eyed this process anxiously with much whinnying and stamping of hoofs.

When he had finished he was tired and sweating profusely, but pride kept him from confessing that the work was too much. He seated himself on a watering-trough, and stripping off his well-worn coat, pinched the brown skin on his arms and chest in a mechanical way. Presently he sighed as he realized that the last man had also disappeared.

"It's a bad business," he remarked aloud.

"What's a bad business?" said his master, appearing a little unexpectedly, and making him scramble to his feet. For the steward having been informed by the gatekeeper that the others

had left, had communicated the information to the master in the non-committal form that there was "trouble in the stables."

"The others have fled," announced the boy in his democratic manner. "I was just thinking aloud that it would be no easy matter to attend to my work, Your Honour."

His master reflected a bit and then said:

"It is unimportant. All these ponies will be taken away soon. They will be wanted as food."

"As food!" echoed this child of the Chinese ghetto, his eyes round with astonishment and his squat, flat nose pointing upwards.

"We will all be hungry soon enough," was the master's grim rejoinder.

Then, he was silent for a long while as he looked at the ponies and patted one or two, saying at last:

"Stay here until our soldiers come this evening to lead the ponies away. When that is over, come and find me."

In the evening the foreign soldiers came — a small party who spoke not a word of the language of the country. But they consulted a

paper, and then held up nine fingers and slapped Wang the Ninth on the back and pointed into the stables, all of which was very intelligible to him.

"*Li-t'ou* (in there)," he said, nodding vigorously and laughing at them. Three men detached themselves from the others and each came out in a minute leading three animals.

When the party had gone and the stables were completely empty, the boy felt depressed — he was no longer "high-hearted" as he expressed it. Not that he was lonely. No Chinese is ever really lonely although, paradoxically, they are the most gregarious race on earth. But this dropping away of everybody impressed him unfavourably. It had the flavour of ruin about it — it was like the loss of much money. He remembered his master's injunction to seek him as soon as the ponies were gone; but somehow he had no desire to move.

He went into his tiny sleeping place, and fetched out from under the coverlet a little bamboo flute; and seating himself on the watering-trough, with his knees drawn up under him and his elbows resting on them, began playing frag-

ments of plaintive tunes picked up in days gone by. He kept this up for a long time repeating little trills and mournful notes because they gave him odd pleasure. In the growing dusk the sparrows hopped nearer and nearer, stealing grain that had fallen on the cobblestones from the last feed he had mixed, and never paying any attention to him and his music. They fitted into the evening as a shadow fits under a tree, and were there because the tree was there.

At last he tired of it, and desisted. Quickly he cooked his evening meal of millet and cabbage, and boiled some tea. When he had finished he changed his tunic and put on his foreign hat and his riding-gaiters.

"It is time," he announced to himself.

He went off slowly, stopping whenever anything attracted his attention, and playing for a few minutes with a dog. But presently, in spite of these delays, he reached the house and slowly walked round to the back.

He peered into the kitchen and the pantry, but everybody was busy. The master was already having dinner and there were guests. In the most indifferent manner he marched to the

front of the house; then on to the verandah outside the dining-room.

The master was sitting at the head of the table; with him were five or six foreign gentlemen, all eating and drinking and talking and waving their hands.

He coughed and moved forward into the light.

"Who is that?" called the master.

"It is I," he said, stepping into the room and standing there without awkwardness. "The foreign soldiers have taken away the ponies as ordered and now I await fresh commands."

He noted without surprise that the guests had firearms with them and that the dinner was being served not by the steward and his assistants, but by two coolies who were working awkwardly and noisily. He had the feeling that the natural order of things had come to an end.

The master was explaining to the others something about him; but his foreign talk was unintelligible to the boy. He guessed, however, that it was not to his discredit from the glances cast at him. He fidgetted a bit, more because he was unaccustomed to standing still than from any other feeling.

"I have just been telling these gentlemen," said his master at length, "that you are worthy of confidence because you have not run off. From today you will be paid a man's full wages."

The boy flushed:

"Money is unimportant. I am content to remain because it would be foolish for me to go away."

The master shook his head:

"Nevertheless you shall be paid as a man. These are your duties for the time being. To watch and report all you can find out. Find me and tell me everything you can learn. Do you understand?"

"Yes, your honour," said the boy very gravely. "That is all?"

When he was safe by himself in the darkness of the compound the boy gave a hop, skip, and a jump, and then rushed madly round as if he were a four-footed animal.

He was to get man's pay and to do as he pleased. This meant at least eight dollars a month — eight dollars when he had been only getting three.

It was almost greater than he could bear.

CHAPTER XVI

WHAT happened subsequently came to the boy in a succession of odd surprises which he did not attempt to correlate. Camps sprang up in the night round the foreign quarter like crops of mushrooms. The soldiers, their black turbans loosely tied round their heads and their gaily coloured tunics open on their chests, were of a different breed from any he had seen before. Sun-blackened, rough and defiant, they brought fear to every one and no one dared to venture near.

“It is curious,” remarked the boy to a chance acquaintance, “that these should be our own people.”

In his eyes they had become a symbol of disaster — something he had never reckoned with — particularly the small cannon ranged threateningly at two or three points with a stack of solid shot piled behind. He did not understand why the world should be turned so topsy-turvy.

One day, when he was out watching one of

these camps, there was a general stir, and the men streamed off in hundreds in one direction. In his eagerness to learn what it was he went as close as he dared. At length the crowd parted and then quite distinctly he saw two men of the Sword Society in their blood-red regalia carrying a human head by the queue. They swung it about as they walked so that every one could see it.

He stared as if hypnotized. The two ruffians strutted boastfully along followed by the soldiery. He guessed that they were visiting the camp in order to infect the men with their own anarchy. He was not educated enough to wonder how it came to pass that in the middle of a great capital, with a vast Palace in the centre, and with Emperor and the Empresses seated within, assassins should hold such sway. So he remained just watching and wondering. And when the ruffians with their hideous trophy had disappeared and there was nothing more to observe, very slowly and very gravely, he rose to his feet (for he had been lying down), and made his way back through a deserted alley-way.

At the end of the alley-way there was a foreign

sentry, and as he had seen him only an hour before, there was no occasion for him to be identified. Nevertheless he drew from his belt his pass — a bit of paper in a foreign language with a seal on it which always gave him a sense of importance.

“*T'ai-to ping* (there are many troops),” he repeated several times, pointing to the spot he had come from; and then he explained by signs that there were guns as well. Then with a wave of the hand he was off to find his master and report what he had seen.

He ran him down in a few minutes since all white men are as easily traceable in the East as treasure-chests lying on a sea-shore. He was superintending the building of a long barricade, and labouring there were all sorts and conditions of men — foreigners in their shirt-sleeves, servants and respectable people who worked together in silence.

The master listened in silence to his tale, stroking his red beard.

“Good,” he said at length, “now go off in another direction, and see if it is the same thing.”

Once beyond this scene of activity the boy's

easy manners fled, and he displayed caution; for all the time be it confessed he was thinking of that ghastly human head. He hugged the compound-walls of every deserted house and never failed to peer round each turning. And just as he was congratulating himself on his methods, he became vaguely aware that some one was looking at him down a rifle-barrel.

He scurried into a doorway, a little frightened in spite of his natural courage. But after an interval his curiosity got the better of him and he determined to try a new line of advance and see who this person was.

This was certainly a new development, he thought. So far the terrorist methods used had been employed under cover of the dark, and the decencies of everyday life had been more or less preserved. But now the soldiery were evidently getting out of hand; and it seemed that at any moment they might open an attack.

By this time he had worked round to another vantage-point. Very quietly and carefully he climbed a tree and looked over. There was the man not fifty feet away. He was lying on his stomach with some loose bricks piled in front of

his head, and he had on the blood-red sash. He was a marauder evidently waiting to secure a foreigner's head, not a regular soldier.

He remained motionless in the tree observing this ominous figure for quite five minutes. Then silently and swiftly he dropped to the ground. Now doggedly, with his head down and his fists tightly clenched he made his way onward. He threaded his way through a maze of little deserted lanes until he came out on the vast open street running round the Imperial Palaces.

He gave a sigh of relief. Here there were people moving — not many but still some — and towards them he walked quickly as though he craved their company.

Two men had stopped and were exchanging comments as he approached. He judged from the blue cloth bundles they carried that they were official servants from some yamen, and that their conical hats and high boots of office had just been exchanged for a more plebeian attire.

"Where do you come from?" said one of them, suddenly catching him by the shoulder, and looking angrily at his feet which were still shod in a pair of foreign shoes.

"From the East city," he rejoined easily and fluently, pointing behind him and finding his tongue at once. "I have been sent to find my uncle who keeps a lantern-shop near the Western Four Arches, as we are all intimidated by the signs of the approaching battle."

The man looked at him suspiciously.

"And those shoes?"

"My brother robbed them from one of the cursed foreigners, and as my own were broken I put them on."

"Take them off!" exclaimed the two together.

The boy hesitated. Then with a muttered word he stooped down and flung them one by one far into the roadway.

"That is good," grunted one of the men, "it is lucky you met us instead of a member of the Sword Society. He would have given you short shrift. Everything foreign must indeed be blotted out."

The second man, however, commented on this in the following manner:

"But there is said to be a foreign army only thirty miles away. If they get into the city it will not go well with us."

The boy picked up this morsel of information ravenously and stored it in his mind.

"Our people will never allow them to advance," objected the first man.

"There has been continuous fighting for several days, and they will doubtlessly soon be driven back," agreed the second speaker, unwilling to be identified with any pessimism.

"Enough," said his companion. "Let us hasten on. It will soon be dark."

Once again the boy was left to his own devices. As soon as they had turned a corner he went and picked up his shoes and seated himself with his back to the Palace wall waiting for darkness.

Here was the whole problem made clear at last. The cat was only playing with the mouse. Until it had been made certain that the mouse could not escape — that is until the foreign army had been driven away, nothing would be done against the foreigners in the capital. The relieving army must be dealt with first.

The boy threw a stone angrily at some crows. Why shouldn't he run away, too? He played with the thought, and though he rejected it, it

came back again and again. If they were all to be killed, he should go whilst there was yet time.

He struck his foot sharply down on the ground. No — he would not do it. He would go back. He had been trusted and he would not fail his trust. So when it was safe and quiet he crept back and reported what he had learnt.

After that days went by silently, days resembling one another as do peas from the same pod. They were beleaguered and yet not beleaguered; surrounded and yet not surrounded; imprisoned and still free. People cautiously slipped in and out, and kept in touch with the great city, and brought in food and news. Yet in spite of this, a heavy and depressing pall hung over the foreign quarter as though it contained only condemned persons. Men talked to one another in low voices as if they were afraid of being overheard. The slightest uncustomary sound made them start up and strain their ears, so that they might have the earliest inkling of disaster.

Sometimes Wang the Ninth was infinitely depressed by this paralyzed life. He would sit

idly in a hidden corner with his knees drawn sharply up and his head between his hands, silently commiserating with himself as he thought over the myriad rumours, and wondering if he had not been an arrant fool not to run away as his mates had done. After all he had only been in foreign service less than two years. He did not owe so much. He was not like those who had lived half a lifetime among foreigners and been converted to their faith. He did not want to be killed and have his head carried around. His compatriots, who had not run away, were continually using that gloomy and resigned expression: *fei-tei-ssü* —“we shall surely die.” That passivity always brought him excitedly to his feet like a shot fired in his ear.

“*Wo-pu-ssü* (I shall not die),” he used to rejoin defiantly. “I shall find a way — you see.”

Then he would march off with his fists energetically clenched and his ugly features drawn-up in a frown, walking with long, unnatural strides like the foreigners walked; and the strangers would ask who was this boy who did not hesitate to express his opinions so rudely in contradiction to his seniors.

After a number of days something did happen. There was a terrible commotion, and the boy stood literally with his mouth open because certain foreigners — a race he thought above common human emotions — ran from house to house as if possessed and cried out words which seemed to him like the words of fear.

The news leaked out soon enough so that every one knew it. Twenty-four hours had been given the foreigners to leave — they were summarily ordered away, men, women and children irrespective of rank and occupation. Failing compliance they would be driven away by gunfire. That was the Imperial pleasure.

Wang the Ninth went blankly among his compatriots trying to find out whether it was flight or not. He heard it said that carts were being requisitioned by some foreigners for great sums of money; then almost immediately he heard the story denied. Some one had ruled that it would be more dangerous to flee than to stay. They must stay, it was said. He had the feeling that the mystery was beyond solution. It was evidently quite impossible to know what was going

to happen. Even his master shook his head. Nobody knew anything worth knowing.

That night passed in confusion.

They were half-way through the next morning when everybody cried that one of the important foreigners had gone out and been summarily killed.

After that for several hours there was a great tide of weeping and running about, and the boy felt lost. Nobody paid the slightest attention to him: every one seemed dazed. In the afternoon, when things were quieter, the sharp crack of rifles sounded and for the first time in his life he heard the hard vicious flight of bullets. After some momentary fear, his natural audacity slowly returned, and he stole near the barricades trying to find out who was firing and at whom. Stray shots had hit two of the foreign soldiers at the barricades and also two of his fellow-countrymen, who sat nursing their hurts like men infinitely surprised.

He was sent for water for one of the wounded soldiers; and when he came back he was just in time to see a foreign doctor make a neat cut in

the wounded man's arm, and to the sound of tremendous foreign curses pull out a thin slip of a bullet with a pair of forceps—a bullet which was passed from hand to hand and examined as closely as though it were a jewel.

This facility of curing a wound delighted him. He went round telling his compatriots that so long as they did not go through your head, these vaunted bullets were not so terrible after all, as the foreign doctors could pull them out at will.

But about midnight a big gun started booming and woke him up instantly. He was too frightened by the noise to do more than to lie listening. He wondered whether the shells when they fell were more terrible than the bullets.

It continued in this way until he lost all his earlier sensations. He even managed to summon up a certain contempt for the cannon which were old-fashioned and could do little more than frighten people, he was told. He almost enjoyed the strange life since there were many exciting moments and many people to talk to. He was constantly used to carry messages from point to point and whenever any of his compatriots

asked for information he would boldly answer: "I will tell you exactly how things are. Many thousands are engaged in firing their rifles at us, but my master says it cannot get any worse and presently a foreign army will certainly arrive."

The sound of rifle-fire ceased to attract any attention even among the women and children, save when it rose to a great roar at night. Once there was great alarm about a fire. As the wind was blowing and it was very dry and hot, some thought the whole area might be consumed. But the fire burnt out and that also was forgotten.

Wang the Ninth was no longer allowed any longer to go to the barricades — in spite of his privileged position, because it was too dangerous. Once being anxious to see the outer aspect of things he crept up the towering city wall where there were many foreign soldiers; but one gave him a cuff over the ear and told him to get down. But he managed to get back in a few minutes by the simple method of volunteering to carry up a sack of provisions for some other soldiers.

The soldier who had cuffed him was greatly amused to see him back in such a capacity. This

time, instead of hitting at him, he slapped him on the shoulder as if he were a friend and gave him a black cigarette to smoke. When his cigarette was finished, as repayment he commenced singing in a shrill falsetto a singing girl's song which made him the hero of the hour as he pretended to be a small-footed woman who was bashful and who tottered in shame at the mere presence of so many men.

These amenities were suddenly arrested by a succession of sharp sounds in the air which he knew too well. All the soldiers ran for their rifles and lay down behind the barricade. Presently they began firing; and the boy, crawling right up to them on his stomach, asked permission in the sign language to look through a loop-hole. This was duly given him; and rapidly he thrust a sharp eye up to a crack, with a loose brick in his hand to mask his face as he saw the soldiers do.

For a long time he could see very little and he wondered at whom so many shots had been fired. Then, slowly, he became aware that just as they had barricades so had the others. Only the enemy had made his very low, and had taken

such advantage of the shrubbery that only at rare intervals was it possible to see some vague movement or the flash of a firearm.

After an hour or so this ceased to be exciting and he abandoned his loophole. The soldiers were all lying on their backs again and talking to one another, save for a look-out who knelt unmoving, peering fixedly for signs of further activity. The bullets hissing over-head sped over so far away. Sometimes they raised little powder-puffs as they struck brickwork or soil hundreds of yards beyond their mark, but more often they disappeared into the unknown. Nevertheless the soldiers would not let him go down from the city wall. He gathered from their signs that if he did so he might be seen and draw the enemy's fire. He would have to wait until dark, they said, pointing to the sun.

That night, however, he never moved either. For after he had assisted the men lighting little fires on which they boiled their kettles, one soldier took him aside, and drew out a big black bottle from his pack and poured out a cup-full of strong spirits. He had one drink himself and then offered the next to the boy, who to show his

familiarity with foreign things swigged it down quickly although it nearly choked him. After that he became so sleepy that he lay down.

When he woke he found that a lot of foreigners who were not soldiers had come up on the wall. They were scanning the southern horizon with telescopes and field-glasses. When they could see no signals in the night they drifted away and gradually it became silent and peaceful and he was left to himself.

CHAPTER XVII

SOME time later he was sitting with some newly-made friends, who had come in for protection because they had received foreign religion. They had built a sort of rude hut which he found enchanting because it was under a big tree and contained all the *disjecta membra* of a disrupted household and he was just in the middle of a long conversation, when a messenger ran him to earth.

"The master is looking for you," he was told.

The summons was so urgent that he made his way off without a word. He was certainly going to be taken to task for the shiftless life into which he had fallen, sleeping wherever he might be and having his food with any one who was good enough to offer him a bowl. He tried to think of a good, plausible way of describing what he was doing; but for some reason his excuses did not seem to him very good. His stained blue cotton coat, his muddy trousers and his torn shoes made him look a veritable raga-

muffin; and when he arrived at his destination and found a number of foreign gentlemen sitting together at a table his awkwardness redoubled. He wracked his brains in a vain effort to discover what was going to happen to him.

Presently his master, who was inside a house came out with a large sheet of paper in his hand. Then he saw all the foreigners put their heads together and talk for a long time arguing so earnestly that he began to realize that it was a matter of great moment. More paper was requisitioned, and several began writing while the others talked.

He watched them intently, trying to pick up what it was all about by their manner and their gestures since he could not understand a word. Through the open window, behind the group, he could see in the room of the house a piece of embroidery spread on a chair which had a golden dragon on it. A ray of sunlight, striking in through the window, lit up the dragon in an amazing way and made it flash and gleam, as if it lived and moved. It amused him to study it. All these fine things would speedily disappear, he mused, if the foreigners decided to go

away — everything would be stripped in a flash. He himself would like to own that fine dragon. . . .

A general movement of chairs snapped the thread of his thoughts. The foreigners seemed to have made up their minds. For nobody spoke any more, and his master had folded up his papers. Now they all looked at him and made remarks in undertones.

The boy forgot about the dragon and shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

“Wang the Ninth,” said his master at last in the vernacular, addressing him in the familiar local way and looking at his soiled figure very earnestly. “We have a very important request to make to you.”

“Yes, your Honour,” he replied at once.

The language used was so peculiar that he was flustered. It was the first time in his life that any one had “requested him.” Hitherto he had always been summarily ordered. What did it mean?

“There is no question of obeying or not obeying,” continued the master. “It is a matter for your free choice. If you accept and are suc-

cessful you will be given as much money as you like — a great deal of money. In fact you may claim what you like. Do you understand?"

"Money is unimportant," rejoined the boy stolidly, dealing with the only point that was intelligible to him. "If I can perform the task it shall be freely done."

He stood with his face very tense waiting to hear what was the ordeal. This was indeed very different from what he had first imagined.

The master said a few words to the other gentlemen in an undertone. Then he resumed the vernacular, using the short clipped sentences of the people, which are very emphatic and precise.

"Listen. It is time that you knew the truth. Already many days have gone by with this battle raging round us, and with all communication cut off. Two weeks ago, according to messages received by us, the foreign army should have arrived. Why has it not come — who is arresting its progress? We must know how long we have to wait. An answer is imperative. Counting all who are here, those who were in residence

originally, and those who have come for protection, there are more than three thousand mouths to feed. Already food is insufficient and many are suffering. Our condition must be made known to those who are delaying their advance — otherwise it may be too late. Do you understand? ”

The boy nodded, a queer light coming into his eyes. Now his lips remain parted expectantly.

“ Yes, your Honour,” he said mechanically.

“ Well,” said the master, “ we have cast about for a suitable person to carry a message and I told these gentlemen of you.”

“ I am to go — that is your wish ! ” exclaimed the boy, clasping his hands.

“ Yes,” said the master gravely.

“ Then I will start,” he said roughly. “ Being of the soil it may be that I can pass through. If not — ”

He unclasped his hands and made a rude gesture. Now he stood stock-still entirely absorbed with this new idea that he was to go out from this place which had been a home for so long — go out alone into the unknown.

His master, instead of answering, turned and said three words in English which the boy always remembered by their sound.

"*He will go,*" said the master gravely. The gentlemen turned to one another and repeated the words several times. "*He will go,*" they said.

"I offered your services," resumed his master in the vernacular, speaking very deliberately, "because I knew that you had courage and were accustomed to every kind of life. Most of our people here have lived only in the city—they would be helpless on such a journey. I told these gentlemen how you came to me in the winter from afar and waited at my door. But this is different. It is no small business. Three hundred *li* by road must you travel and three hundred *li* back. A man, with everything helping him, may make the journey in ten days and less. But now that the road is infested with soldiers and that fighting is general, we should count ourselves lucky if you made the journey in twenty days. We can wait twenty days, even thirty. But forty days would be too long. Do you understand?"

"Yes, your Honour," said the boy simply. "I shall make inquiries from others who know the road and then it will be easy."

"No inquiries must be made," interrupted the master. "You must remain here until you start tonight. There may be spies in our midst. Silence is necessary. Otherwise all may prove useless. Everything will be explained to you here."

He began showing him on a map the chief places on the road and taught him the names. He drilled him as to his line of conduct in every eventuality that he could think of. And at last, when he had exhausted all this catechizing, he heaved a sigh and stopped abruptly.

"Now for the message," he said.

One of the other gentlemen handed him a tiny piece of tissue paper with writing on it. He showed the boy how it could be rolled up into a ball or into a spiral or folded flat — just as he liked.

The boy took the little scrap in his hand, tested it quickly with an adroit hand to see what he could do with it.

Then suddenly he acted. He had rolled it into

a thin wad, and quickly but carefully slipped it into an ear. It was absolutely hidden.

There were exclamations of surprise from the gentlemen at the table at his cleverness.

“But are you sure that you can keep it there for many days?” questioned his master anxiously.

“Certainly. In smuggling, the account of the smuggled goods is always carried like that —”

“But then it may be known to others?”

The boy shook his head.

“No — it is only known to a few. It is a trick of the city gates and in the country they will not suspect it.”

After that they kept him there until the sun had set and it had become dark. A crackling rifle-fire commenced but nobody moved from the house. This was more important than anything that could happen at the barricades. When it was quite dark, and he had been given a meal, and money in sufficient quantity for a fortnight's food, they started off in a body. To the city wall they all marched quickly, and up the self-same ramp where he had jested and played with the foreign soldiers.

On the city wall a long rope was tied round his waist, an anxious group surrounded him — and some last advice whispered to him which he brushed aside.

“I who have gone up and down with my naked hands am not afraid,” he muttered. “Only it is necessary to lower away the rope until all weight is released. When I have cast myself free I shall jerk so, once, twice hard.”

“In an hour or so the moon will rise,” spoke his master for the last time. “Whether there are soldiery posted at night beneath the city wall we do not know. But some have been seen from time to time at dawn. Be cautious but be quick. By dawn you must be far away. Are you ready?”

For answer the boy climbed on to the parapet, a small lithe figure. With his graceful Oriental hands, he clasped the brickwork for a moment; then with infinite quickness slipped his weight on to the strain of the rope.

“Now,” he muttered, balancing himself beautifully.

Quickly they began lowering. The boy, with his rough, powerful toes working through his

cloth shoes, played at the brickwork as he descended, always keeping touch so that as the cord lengthened he should not be dashed against the hard rough face. He was down the fifty feet in less than thirty seconds — standing on the sand of the outer city.

He drew a deep breath, untied the loose knots, jerked quickly at the rope twice, saw a dim outline of heads peering over at him, and then without fear or hesitation stole straight into the black night where the enemy lay.

CHAPTER XVIII

HE showed infinite cunning in his advance. His sheltered life dropped from him like a discarded garment. Fortified by his long experience of vagabond days he displayed the cunning of the young animal that knows that older animals are stronger and more savage, and must be kept off by stealth and not by strength.

Keeping close to the deep shadow of the city wall, he watched carefully the ground in front of his feet so that he should not fall over sleeping men. In summer it was not rare for men to sleep along this sandy stretch where the camel caravans passed; and if there were soldiers posted here that was what they would certainly be doing.

South of him lay the broad city moat, a noisome antediluvian defence. This he knew he could not cross save by the stone bridges at the city gates, for it was full of a black terrible slime. Once in his childhood he had been nearly

choked by falling into it, and he still cherished a wholesome dread of its nature.

He went on slowly thinking of all sorts of things as he stole forward. Down here, with the great barrier of the city wall cutting him off, the rifle-fire round the foreign quarter sounded faint — as if it were miles away. He seemed to have left far behind him all the troubles and the interests of many chequered days; what was real and absorbing to him was to keep tally of the outjutting buttresses, so that he might carefully hide himself before the stone bridge was reached.

Some hovels, built by beggars, loomed up unexpectedly after he had gone half-a-mile or so. He threw himself on the ground, and listened long and carefully before he advanced any further. He knew well that if there were soldiers about they would have certainly taken these shelters and driven the owners away. He lay so long and so still on the ground that he dozed a little; when he opened his eyes the waning moon was coming slowly and majestically over the horizon, making the obscurity of the mighty city wall seem more funereal than ever.

He watched the moon curiously and lazily as

if it had some special message for him. In a stately manner it lifted itself higher and higher until it was far above the earthline. Now it threw over the scene a great silver light in which the hovels stood out like black islands.

Not a sound from them — not a movement. Reassured he scuttled forward until he was in their shadow. He was sure they were empty. There was no sound of breathing. Yet to be quite sure he did not stir for minutes.

How queer! As he crept on he saw in the moonlight beyond the hovels a single old beggar sleeping — a very old man with a white beard, who lay on his back, with his knees pulled up sharply, and one arm sticking up as if it did not belong to him. The figure fascinated the boy. He watched it for a long time. He was quite sure that any one sleeping here now must know perfectly where the soldiers were posted, and what sort of men they were — and their numbers, too. Yielding to an impulse he crawled right up to the sleeper and tapped on the arm which fell at once.

“*Ta-ko* (elder brother) ” he said in an undertone, using a polite phrase of the people to be

sure of a polite reception. "I have strayed far from my home and am hungry and frightened. I could manage a bowl of something warm if I knew where to get it."

No answer.

He tried again:

"*Yeh-yeh* (grand-father) can you not give me some comforting information about this neighbourhood?"

Still no answer.

"Tortoise!" he exclaimed, exchanging his politeness for an habitual insult in his irritation as he pulled at the man's sleeve. "Old tortoise, you sleep deep out here in your rags under the city wall."

Then something prompted him to stop and gaze open-mouthed at the old man's bare chest and stomach. It had a big dark stain. He bent lower until his eyes were only a few inches away. Quite distinctly in the moonlight he could see the marks of the wound.

"*Ssü-la* — he is dead," the boy whispered in a hollow voice.

He was dead — evidently shot down by the

soldiers. He had been killed in sight of his home.

Death in the East is no mystery: yet the boy shivered once or twice because he was so lonely. The vast barren space under the wall was tenanted only by this dead man and himself; and lurking somewhere near were the soldiers.

From far away came a peculiar grunt and snarl which was repeated again and again. The sound rose and hung on the night air, and now the boy rejoiced.

"Camels," he exclaimed aloud in his joy. There was a caravan of animals evidently camped just by the stone bridge, waiting like him for the dawn. At the first streak of daylight they would be off. It would be easy to join them. By mixing with the drivers he might escape notice. Now with the phlegm and patience of his race he sat down with his legs tucked under him prepared to wait for dawn.

Several times he became so drowsy that he heeled over, waking himself up completely with the shock of falling to the ground. But he was determined to remain awake cost what it might

to his resolution. There would be a bare few minutes when dawn came to carry out his plan: if he missed the first coming of daylight it would be too late and the camels would be gone.

Calculating by the moon, at three o'clock he began to creep forward on his hands and knees. He might be mistaken for a dog, he thought, if any one were watching. He managed it so well that in the gentle night breeze he smelt the camels long before he could make out a single one of them. Then listening carefully as he approached, he could hear the murmur of the camel-drivers' voices. Already they were awake since it was their habit to start in the dark. But now they would not move until clear daylight for fear of the soldiers.

Dawn at last and from near the rings of kneeling camels wreaths of smoke. The drivers were evidently boiling tea for themselves, purposely delaying their departure until it was safe.

Now clear daylight. The boy by working along under the city wall was only fifty yards away, sheltered by a high bank of sand. He sat down with his back to the brickwork watching for the start.

The well-remembered snarling commenced. Jerking roughly at the nose-rings the drivers were raising the camels to their feet. Now they stood in a great shaggy herd and with their clumsy bells clanking, they started off. Quickly yet quietly he raced after them until he was near the last string: for it is the custom of the country to tie seven to a group which is led by one man. He gave a swift glance up at the empty baskets, and saw some sweet-potato vine hanging down. They were fruits-camels, he was sure. He knew the road they would take out of the city. It was just right for him.

Round the great belly of brick — the curtain of the city gate — the camels progressed. There was the stone bridge right in front of them; and on it were gaudy soldiers' flags. The caravan had come to a dead halt. The boy peering round the camels' hairy legs could see that there was an altercation with some guards. One camel-driver was down on his knees kowtowing humbly. There was a long pause during which the boy's heart was in his mouth. Would they be allowed to proceed? At last, the long train commenced

swaying forward once more: they had been given the right to leave the city.

The leading files were already passing across the stone bridge when the boy saw that the soldiers stopped and interrogated each man leading his string of seven animals. If they did that to the men what would they not do to him?

In a flash he made up his mind to a desperate move. There was some long green creeper, in which the fruit had been packed, still hanging to the empty baskets on the last camel's back. The boy plucked it rapidly down, edged up to the last camel's head and rapidly pushed it into the camel's mouth. The camel grunted its pleasure and commenced mashing the acid creeper. The boy gave it more. Having quieted it, he grasped the cord hanging from the baskets, and with a desperate leap managed to pull himself half-way up. Then holding on like grim death to the fur of the animal, with a swift wriggle he did an old trick: he threw himself upside down and got a foot round a hump. Hanging head down, and clawing at the animal's furry hide, he jerked his light weight completely up. Exhausted and

deathly pale from the exertion, he lay at last safe between the humps.

The moment of ordeal had arrived.

He knew that there was nothing to fear from the driver of the last string. He was at least twenty yards ahead with seven swaying animals in between; and with his heart certainly quaking from fear of the soldiers. It was only these he had to fear. With his eyes feigning sleep he squinted out beneath his eyelashes rocking himself to and fro. Here they were in numbers, in their parti-coloured tunics and their rifles held menacingly, ready for any sort of violence, delighting in violence. The boy thought of the white-bearded beggar lying dead on the sands with the ants beginning already to crawl over him, and closed his eyes completely, as if he were really sleeping.

He heard their rough talk. He heard one man call attention to the last tortoise-egg on the last camel; but no one actually molested him.

Clankety-clank went the camels. The stone-bridge was far behind before he dared move even so much as an eyelash. Then at last he boldly

looked behind. They were turning a corner — safe. Here the narrow street was absolutely deserted. No soldiers. He slipped to the ground like a flash and disappeared into a twisting lane.

CHAPTER XIX

HE knew this part of the outer city very accurately; for the great grain markets were here, and the farriers and the horse-doctors clustered thick where thousands of draft animals were daily at work in times of peace. In days gone by he had often come to have his master's ponies cupped or otherwise medicated by these men whose science was mainly a hoary tradition handed down from father to son, and who yet had a wonderful if empirical knowledge of all animals and their ailments.

He had greatly loved these excursions which had sometimes consumed the best part of a day. Violent discussions always accompanied every case which called for treatment; for the grooms considered that their reputations would be imperilled if they did not cavil at every diagnosis. Although they treated the aged horse-doctors with respect, they wished to show that they, too, had knowledge. Sallies of wit, which attracted

half the idlers in the street, made these disputations memorable things: every one gave tongue to what was in them and the talk was endless.

How changed it had all become! There was not a soul abroad and of all the thousands of animals there was not a single team to be seen. Every door was closed, every caravanserai shuttered. Commerce had been frightened away, killed by the fear of bullets. On went the boy yawning and feeling hungry and tired and thirsty, and increasingly alarmed by the dead silence. There was not even a drop of water to drink — nothing. The very street watering-troughs were dry; all the buckets had been removed from the common wells. Not a drop of water for man or beast. What a condition!

The more he thought of it the more consumed he was by thirst. But as a horse in the desert infallibly makes for water, so now he made his made his way towards certain fields. He had often noted how melons grew in patches almost alongside the trading city, cut off from the roadway by low mud walls. A longing for the big, luscious water-melons, which he had not tasted that year, became so overwhelming that he could

hardly wait. He ran on, thinking only of this one thing, no longer caring whether he was seen or not. At last he saw green ahead. There were the fields and the fruit gardens.

A dog ran and barked furiously at him as he boldly jumped over a low mud boundary wall, but he threw a clod of earth at it and drove it off. He ran through some buckwheat standing almost man-high, crushing down the growing grain and wondering whether this year they had forgotten to plant the melons. No — here were the melon-patches, great quantities of the succulent gourds lying ripe on the ground, each on its own little bed of straw. With the skill of the country-boy he picked out the biggest and ripest one there was; broke it open with two or three savage stamps of his foot; and then sat down indifferent to everything so as to enjoy it.

Oh, the good red fruit! He completely devoured the whole melon in less than fifteen minutes, eating right down to the rind and not wasting a particle. Then as he sat with his face and bared chest bathed in the juice, he wondered whether he could attempt another. Lazily reclining on the ground among the fragments of

his feast, he debated the problem idly as he looked at his swollen paunch. But finally he made up his mind that he had eaten to the uttermost limit of man. Now reluctantly he rose to his feet and determined to resume his journey.

As he scrambled over the mud wall he suddenly remembered that he might have been seen by a watcher of crops; and for a full five minutes he studied every inch of the ground within eyesight. Crouching down beside the mud wall he picked out each little watch-tower unerringly. Communities living wholly by agriculture, and knowing nothing else, invariably look upon their fields as something sacred. So it happened here that all over the land, as the grain and fruit ripen, watch-towers of matting and poles are run up by the agricultural population. With ancient matchlocks in their hands, which they sometimes discharge to warn off trespassers, men sit in these watching day and night. The boy knew these things as well as he knew the shape of his hands; for they were as much a part of his world as street lighting and railways and other manifold inventions are in the West. Where now were the watchers of crops?

There were apparently none. Overcome with curiosity, very deliberately he made his way to the nearest tower; walked right under it, and peered up. Empty! He passed a second; it was the same thing. When he found that all were deserted and that the standing grain and ripe fruit was looking after itself he shook his head dolefully. There was on his face the pessimism only possible in a race of cultivators four thousand years old.

"This is a bad business," he murmured aloud. "The end has indeed come —"

Nothing that had occurred since he had been lowered down the city wall so depressed him. He felt completely abandoned. All the guarantees of life and order were gone. For if it were like this within the limits of the city administration, what must it not be in the open country. . . . He thought of the many miles he had to traverse and his heart sank.

Still he walked on as quickly as he could. He had a certain goal to attain. He meant to attain it. Frowning to himself he went quicker and quicker.

A low broken gateway at last announced the

end of the outer city and the spot where he would pass into the open country. But the splotch of colour he saw in the shadow of the gate halted him instantly and changed the currents of his thoughts. He forgot all about the fear which had driven a whole population into hiding. His own business had become urgent again.

He stood casting about for a plan to enable him to pass this last egress safely. He could think of nothing. He had indeed forgotten all about the outer city gate. It had not occurred to him that there would be soldiers here just as there were soldiers at every other vital point.

The low brick wall ahead of him was so eroded by wind and rain that he thought how easy it would be for him to climb it. Still in the broad daylight he dare not make the attempt with guards on the alert.

Walking very slowly, he approached the gateway until he could see who were the men there. They were cavalry. A number of saddled ponies were cropping the scanty grass whilst their riders lay asleep beside them. Still some men were

awake, for there were the figures in the gateway.

For a long time he watched. Nobody was passing either in or out of the gateway: he did not know what subterfuge to adopt. Then, as he stood there, Heaven sent him assistance. He suddenly caught sight of a small country-boy, about his own size, with a basket of manure and a manure-rake beside him, asleep behind some bushes. It was instantly plain to him that the boy had followed the troopers for the droppings of their horses. Now he made up his mind, and he approached the boy on the point of his toes. The basket was easy enough to pick up; but the rake was placed securely under the sleeping boy's legs — to prevent just such a catastrophe as was about to occur. Wang the Ninth, with a skill which a long apprenticeship had given him, very gently and insinuatingly braced up the legs inch by inch, and then deftly and swiftly pulled away the rake from under the luckless sleeper who stirred uneasily but did not awake. Now with the stealth of the Indian Scout he tip-toed away. He knew that he was fully armed

with a passport — that is if the other boy did not awake and give the alarm.

For a hundred yards or so he moved torn with anxiety. Then as no shouts came from behind, he gained confidence. With amazing effrontery as he approached the gateway he commenced singing lustily the "Song of the Wine-jug," as if the fresh morning had put music into his heart. Nonchalantly and easily, he walked up to the hobbled ponies, and manœuvred round their tails with his rake. Carefully he garnered up all their droppings, singing all the time. Now with the filled basket slung across his shoulder, he made his way into the gateway, searching for more manure as he walked, and even stopping to speak to a soldier.

"These horses are so poorly fed that they are hardly worth my trouble," he remarked coarsely enough, swinging the laden basket from one shoulder to the other.

The man cursed him for his insolence but he did not molest him. On he went quicker now. He scrambled up a high bank and made his way into the fields. Once hidden from sight he threw the basket and the rake where they could not be

found. Then without a thought of the wretched youth he had robbed, and with nothing to encumber him, he began running as hard as he could.

He was free — utterly free.

CHAPTER XX

NOON found him asleep in the fields of *kaoliang*, that giant millet growing twelve feet high which is so dense that one may become lost in its golden tangle. Utterly worn out, he had crept into this safe hiding-place, and amidst the drone of the countless insects he had dropped on his back, and lost consciousness — a small, unobserved creature on the face of a troubled earth.

Yet in spite of his fatigue his sleep was disturbed. Uneasy dreams made him thrash around and babble confused talk. He again lived through all his experiences of the night before and found no comfort in the success which had crowned his efforts. To escape from the great city in the manner he had done was a feat which should have brought him peace. Nevertheless as he slept he constantly heard his master's voice chiding him for not showing more haste. The voice was so clear that he under-

stood perfectly everything that was said; and — strangest of all — the three mysterious words which every one had spoken at the last fateful interview, when he had been committed to this enterprise, sounded unendingly in his ears in a great undertone.

Perhaps it was the harsh grinding of the cicadas which brought back the message so insistently as he lay semi-conscious; for the cicadas were singing with all the might which is theirs in the summer months. Well — he had travelled far and braved many risks — was that not enough? No — for now his master stood immediately over him, a huge figure full of awe. His red beard bristled as he spoke with the force of his superior judgment; and as the boy watched thunderstruck, the red beard came nearer and nearer in a menacing way until at length he could feel the bristles sticking into his face. . . .

With a startled cry he awoke and threw off some millet stalks which had fallen across him. Now he yawned and shook himself like a dog. He was fully awake but still a little frightened. The vividness of the apparition slowly disappeared like clouds driven along the skies by a

high wind. As he sat up and tightened his belt he was suddenly overwhelmed by the great emptiness which oppressed his stomach.

"I haven't eaten for a whole day,—that is apart from the melon," he grumbled, looking down at his thin body, and scratching his arms and hands morosely. "It is possible to die of starvation even with food growing around you."

Now he jumped up, and went rustling through the grain. In a land of poverty — where the struggle for existence is bitter and keen — not to eat is a confession of failure.

There were acres and acres of the same field; and as he threaded his way forward he cursed the owners for their greed in tilling so much land. But at length the great field ceased; and he came out suddenly on to a rutted roadway and saw in the distance a tumbledown little red building. It was a country shrine. He studied it critically for a long while, and then remembered, from the manner in which three trees grew beside it, having seen it before. It was about twenty *li* — seven miles counted in English — to the south-east of the capital. He had come twenty *li* since he had left the last city gate.

Reassured, he went up to the closed doors without further hesitation.

“*Lao-ho-shang* (old harmonious and esteemed one),” he loudly called, hammering with his fists on the rotting woodwork, “a foodless man is at your gateway. Distribute your goodness. *Lao-ho-shang, lao-ho-shang*, come to your door!”

He repeated his call more and more vigorously; and presently there was the sound of slow footsteps and the gate was cautiously unbarred. But it was only opened an inch or so by a priest who was neither old nor young, and who was clad in a garment of faded saffron edged with black.

The priest eyed him suspiciously for a long time and at last commenced this interrogatory:

“How far have you journeyed?”

“Many miles from the South, many miles indeed.”

“And what is your purpose in journeying when all is unsettled?”

“I seek my relatives because my father is dead.”

“Where are your relatives?”

“In the city —”

“And what is your name?”

The boy without hesitation continued to lie calmly in the way all his countrymen readily do — that is when they are pressed.

“I am called Liu — I am the second in the family — Liu Erh — I have walked a hundred miles to find my relatives. Food is what I need to soothe my hunger. A little hot food.”

“Um,” — said the priest, “I, too, am short of food. For a fortnight I have received no alms, not one copper coin has been vouchsafed me. With trouble abroad how dare I venture out? And should I give away from my small store when I may shortly be in need myself?”

Wang the Ninth, because of his hunger, was becoming angry at this long discussion. Already he had measured his man: he knew him to be a coward and covetous as well. With a swift movement he thrust his foot in between the gatepost and the door so that the priest could not possibly close it again, — that is unless he threw him back and broke his foot. Now very roughly he used what was instantly effective — intimidation, based on a half-truth.

“Look here,” he said, “I have waited pa-

tiently and answered all your questions and am very hungry. I have just passed soldiers. If you do not give me freely I shall go and find them and declare that you have silver buried in the Temple."

There was brief hesitation which may have lasted two seconds, but no more. Then the door swung wide open.

"Come in," said the priest sullenly. Asia is like that. By audacity a child may work his will over old and young alike. That is one of the unappreciated morals of the Bible.

Wang the Ninth, again victorious, loafed in with an expression of suppressed amusement on his face which would have done credit to an actor. Behind him the priest shut the door securely; then turned round and looked at him; muttered something under his breath; and finally led him to a room where his store of food was secreted under a broken bench. Together, in this companionship, neither speaking much, they prepared a meal of boiled millet, a little salted vegetable, a cup of tea.

Presently having eaten his fill, the marauder became loquacious.

"Your stock of food is indeed low," he remarked, examining everything and looking into the grain-bin several times. "When you first spoke about shortage I doubted your story. If you wait a little I will fetch you something as repayment and prepare a bite for myself for later on."

Without further ado, he marched out through the gateway and down the roadway to where his sharp eyes half an hour before had noticed a patch of Indian corn. Calmly, as if it were his own property, he pulled off a great mass of corn cobs, only taking of the best. Then he stripped off his short cotton coat, loaded it up with the loot, and marched back with this fat bundle to the keeper of Buddha's shrine.

"Here," he said, "I have taken from an abundance that is neglected. If there is suspicion or accusation I bear the blame. Now I prepare my share."

With deft fingers he stripped off the husk from a dozen cobs, threw them into a pot of water, and boiled them over the small charcoal fire until beads of perspiration stood on his forehead. When he had satisfied himself that they were

well-cooked, he heaved a sigh of relief and desisted. He had a couple of days' supply of food to the good, no matter what happened; for Indian corn is a good and strength-giving food.

"I can journey in peace," he remarked, "when the sun is a little lower and there is coolness in the air. Not soon will I commit the fault of journeying with no provision belt. A hundred miles is far to travel for the poor."

The priest talked a little but without much gusto. He was irritated by everything that had occurred since he had unbarred his doors; and after the manner of his race he was absorbed thinking about the way he could redress the balance in his favour. With his arms behind his back, master of the situation, Wang the Ninth began sauntering round the narrow courtyard of the little Temple, and lifting the heavy reed curtain over the door-way of the shrine he peered in.

"Who is your honourable Saint?" he inquired politely, looking at the square, clumsy, gilt figure. Then almost before he had finished asking the question he burst into a short laugh. His quick eyes had noticed something. "*Lao-ho-shang,*

have you noticed that an ear has dropped off?" He pointed to the left ear of Buddha's disciple which was indeed missing.

The priest became more nettled than ever.

"What would you?" he said. "This locality is poor—and very miserly as well. Only on harvest-days do I receive alms in sufficiency for my welfare. As for renovation where shall I find funds? All the shrines for many miles lack repair, and some are even deserted by their keepers."

The devil in the boy leaped to the surface. With a rapid gesture his hand travelled to his belt, and with a flash he threw a bright silver coin on the matted floor as an offering.

"There," he said, "I have contributed."

The priest stood staring.

"Silver!" he exclaimed as if that had been the name of his God. "You carry silver!" Now he bent down and picked up the coin which he examined carefully.

"Yes, silver," assented Wang the Ninth, "an undoubted piece of silver."

"How is it that you who lack food have

money?" said the priest. His manner was full of suspicion.

The boy laughed easily.

"It is this way. Many in our locality were employed in the city before the trouble commenced and they have all fled back. They had money in their belts, and two who had known my father gave me small contributions to help me on my way. Had it not been for this friendly help I would indeed have fared badly."

"Um," said the priest, "and how many such coins have you with you?"

Wang the Ninth took several steps backwards so that if needs be he could run for it. There was a note in the priest's voice that he did not like. He was quite capable of trying to rob him. Already he regretted his indiscretion.

"How many coins? Ho — ho, I am a bad hand at calculating." He took a few more steps backward. "Are you discontented with my generosity? — well, I cannot help it." With a swift movement he bent down and picked up the bundle of corn which he had made. "The day is waning, I cannot waste more time. *Lao-ho-*

shang, I am about to leave you." And with this lightly and quickly he sprang away and then through the narrow door on to the roadway.

The priest followed him. On his face there was a sharp struggle. Had he been able to do so, he would have rushed at him. But the chances of success were poor having in view his feebleness and the boy's agility. So sullenly he watched Wang the Ninth walk away looking over his shoulder as he went, and beginning the song, "Every priest is only a thief with a shaven pate," which is known to every urchin in the land.

CHAPTER XXI

IN the cool of the evening he walked on steadily hour after hour thinking of the priest, and sometimes wondering why he met no soldiers. He began to believe that things would not be so hard as he had pictured them. Here at least was no trace of battle or tumult.

The long July day faded slowly away and still he walked. Now that the capital was far behind him, occasionally there were village people to be seen tending their fields: yet it was plain that they watched the roads and feared every movement on them. Still the mere presence of people reassured him. Immediate danger there could be none: otherwise not a human being would he have seen. Even the lack of travellers could be easily explained. How could people travel when there were no conveyances for hire? Every mule or horse was certainly hidden away as a measure of precaution, soldiers always seizing these first.

Still, in spite of his growing confidence, when-

ever he saw a village marked out like an island in the midst of the cultivation by the dense groves of trees,— he wasted many minutes walking far around so as to avoid all danger. He greatly feared to go into them, and see the red cloth and the mystic signs on the lintels which proclaimed adhesion to the dread cult. Once, when he was thinking of these things, he came right upon a man lying half-asleep on a grassy bank — which so startled him that he ran into the fields and hid for many minutes before he dared resume his journey. What he feared most was detention — being seized and held indefinitely for his working-value if for no other reason. Knowing his own people to the bottom of their hearts, he realized how easily such enslavements could be carried out — particularly in troubled times. A week's time lost might spell ruination. At all costs he must avoid being made a slave.

Meanwhile he travelled on. Guided by the marvellous sense of direction which the Chinese possess in common with savage races, he bore steadily towards the southeast where his goal lay. No twists or turns confused him; after the

longest detour he recovered the exact direction as if a compass were set before him, never faltering or pausing an instant, but always hastening on at the same quick gait.

At last it was so dark that he could no longer see and reluctantly he stopped. Sitting cross-legged he opened his bundle of Indian corn and with a sigh of relief commenced munching the golden grain. He ate half his store before his hunger was appeased; and then he drew out from his tunic two peaches that he had stolen from an orchard on the way. As for drink, an hour before he had taken the precaution to draw water from an irrigating-well in a cabbage patch and he had drunk so deeply that he was no longer troubled by thirst.

Now he sat in the night, feeling satisfied by his frugal repast, and listening to the sounds. Far in the distance village-dogs were barking monotonously after their wont, and he idly tried to calculate how distant they might be. Were they barking at some person or merely baying an evening salute? He could not guess and soon he listened to them no more.

Presently some birds on a tree near by at-

tracted his attention and he turned. They were fluttering uneasily as if something were disturbing them. Without a sound he stole under the tree and listened like a trapper. His keen eyes and his animal knowledge presently told him what had taken place; and he gave a grunt of disdain. It was a very usual occurrence — a bat trying to invade a crows' preserve where there was rotting food stored. With a sudden screech the invader was even now flying away, beaten off by the fear of sharp bills and sharper claws.

Once again he seated himself on the grassy bank. He half-regretted now that he had not ventured into the village where the dogs were barking. It was, however, too late to move — he would have to pass the night where he was — all alone where the fire-devils might trouble him. There were sure to be fire-devils abroad; for although the nearest habitations were a mile away, the square of pine-trees, whose tops he could just make out against the horizon, meant a family burial-ground and the fire-devils would chase backwards and forwards between them and the village.

As he thought of that he hummed to himself quite loudly to keep the spirits off. He would not have minded the solitude so much if it had not been for them; he really detested the fire-devils. There was an old man he knew who was so bothered by them that he dare not walk abroad after dark. It is true that they belonged to a harmless breed and were very different from malignant spirits. They only bothered people by trying to open doors and windows at night so as to bring in fire. Perhaps they would not molest him in the open. Lying down flat on his back mechanically he thrashed around with a stout branch he had picked up to show that he was on the alert. But, presently being tired from his long exertions, the branch moved more and more slowly, and finally slipped to the ground where it lay forgotten. The child-man slept!

Later he awoke with a start. The waning moon had crept into the sky and was already creeping out of it again. With his empirical knowledge of lunar movements he knew that dawn was still far off: yet he sat up uneasily and took a cast at the eastern horizon, picking up

the guiding stars like a sailor. Then he looked at the tops of the pine-trees. He could sleep in peace. There was no possibility of light for a long while. As he was in unknown country, it was quite useless starting in the dark; for he might blunder into danger at the first turn.

Now he yawned, and as he lay down he began calculating how far he had travelled. He added and subtracted in his head by a peculiar method until he finally produced a total which he was convinced was correct. He was at least sixty *li* — twenty miles — from the capital, which was one quarter of the journey, always supposing he must travel the whole distance. One quarter of the distance, that was good. Idly, as he sat up, he struck at a buzzing insect and sniffed the smell of dampness; but he was still tired and soon he sank back again on to the broad earth's hard bosom.

The next time when he awoke it was broad daylight. Full of consternation he jumped up. The sun was well over the horizon line, and hot beams were striking him on the face. Hastily he kicked on his shoes, picked up his bundle and his branch, and started off.

The village of barking dogs grew up on his left, and as he saw a long country-cart draw out of it he was sorely tempted to go into it and buy a cup of tea. But with admirable resolution he resisted the temptation, and trudged steadily on licking his parched lips. At all costs he must not be stopped here — when he had covered just one quarter of the way.

Presently providence willed that he should come to a little stream. He lay on his stomach and drank deep gulps of the refreshing water with thankfulness in his heart. Then, when his thirst was satisfied, he ducked his face in it two or three times, leaving it to dry in the warm air as he walked quickly on.

Twice during the morning he robbed orchards of their fruit, once having to run hard because he was chased by women and boys who cursed him bitterly. But by midday all his Indian corn was gone and he was hungry again. A little disconsolately he lay down to rest, taking off his shoes and his cloth socks, and examining his feet which were chafed, in spite of their hardness, by his steady march.

Now he calculated anew. He was sure he had

added forty-five *li* to the sum total; that made a hundred and five in all. By night he should pass the half-way point if he hastened. Then with luck two days more should see his journey over. Very seriously, he picked up a tiny twig and felt in his ear to see if the message was still packed tight. Yes.

At three o'clock in spite of the sun's heat he started again. Soon his face was streaming with perspiration and though he stripped off his tunic and walked naked to the waist the water ran down his little brown body in streams. It was so hot that he looked suspiciously at the skies, picking out the signs with a frown; for this was a complication he had not reckoned with. There would be a thunderous downpour within a few hours — a downpour such as only tropical lands know, which puts the water on the roads many feet deep. . . .

In his anxiety he broke suddenly into a jog-trot: it would be quite impossible for him to pass the night in the open in such circumstances. He must somehow seek a safe place.

The sun was sinking fast and the black cloud-masses were piling thick when to his surprise to

the west, with the sun throwing it into bold relief — a long earth embankment grew up.

“*T'u ch'eng* (a walled city),” he exclaimed, wondering where he had got to. Very slowly and suspiciously he went on, watching for people and trying to make out some indication of a gateway. But there was no one about, and no gateway to be discerned. Moreover, the long earth embankment was covered with grass.

As he came right under it, he paused to listen like a hunter in the desert. Not a sound. He stopped and picked up pebbles at which he looked with amazement. All the ground under the rampart was littered with them. What did this mean? Very carefully he scrambled up the incline and peered over with his mouth open. There were fields on the other side just as there were fields on this side. Then a pile of half-burnt timber struck his eyes, and he burst into a laugh at his foolishness.

“The railway!” he exclaimed.

It was even so — he had swerved farther to the North than he had allowed for. This was the destroyed railway — along which the foreign army had advanced. It had been completely de-

stroyed so that there could be no possibility of its ever being used again.

This evidence of the ruthless war which had come and gone made him stand there mute. He was so absorbed that for a number of minutes he did not move, searching with his eyes in every direction for friend or foe. A terrific peal of thunder brought him to, however; and since there was nothing for it, he broke into a jog-trot along the embankment.

A big drop of rain smote him in the face and he went still faster. It would not take long now before the rain came in streams. Vivid blinding flashes of lightning now lit up the piling clouds, and the thunder commenced. There would be ropes of water soon — enough to drown a man.

The embankment was rough under his feet and covered with debris, but he feared to leave it. One foot was bleeding from a sharp piece of iron that had gone clean through his cloth shoe; but he scarcely felt the pain and soon the rain washed it clean. On he ran, bedraggled and beginning to feel cold, but with his indomitable pluck still strong in him. Through the mist of

water he saw a thing rise up: it was a tiny brick-house. He was too ignorant of railways to know that it was a linesman's house — or all that remained of. . . . For him it represented a haven of refuge — if the roof were still intact. He ran on falling several times in his haste and almost blinded by the rain which came down in sheets of water, and deafened by the roar of thunder which was now unending. . . .

At last!

He tumbled through the doorway exhausted and panting. Here was a roof to shelter him. Two men who had taken refuge there, called loudly in their alarm at his sudden apparition. But all he could do was to gasp that he, too, had been surprised by the storm and had come for refuge. Then he flung himself on the ground and lay like an exhausted dog, panting as if his heart would break.

CHAPTER XXII

PRESENTLY he felt better and began to take stock of the two other intruders. Though he was as bedraggled and as tired as if he had been ducked in a stream, his wits did not desert him, nor was his caution relaxed.

So far as he could see, they were mere villagers surprised by the storm. He looked keenly to see some trace of the red girdle, or any of the dread insignia which had brought convulsions to the land — but there was nothing more menacing in each man's belt than a sickle.

“*Ai-ya,*” he exclaimed, purposely pretending to shiver from the cold and wet, and screwing up his ugly intelligent face as he studied them. “Certainly it is a piece of ill-luck to be caught by such weather. What an amount of water! If I had only shown caution I should have stopped an hour ago. Still fortune favoured me when I caught sight of this roof. Without it, it

would be hard to say what would have happened."

The two men grunted but made no other audible response.

Conversation was indeed difficult. Peals of thunder rang out incessantly and the blinding lightning only served to show the torrential downpour which was fast converting the country into a lake. In the oncoming darkness the narrow brick hut seemed gloomy and uninviting; and the sullenness of the two men, crouching as far from the gaping doorway as possible, added to the disheartening nature of the hour.

"I am on my way to rejoin my uncle," resumed the boy still plucky as ever, and determined to profit by this opportunity to acquire information. "I have travelled nearly a hundred *li* but I lost my way when the storm came on. What is the nearest village?"

"Langfang," said one of the two abruptly.

"Langfang," he echoed, starting up in his excitement in spite of his fatigue. Then, fearful that he had acted his part badly by betraying unaccountable emotion, he sank back again in his semi-recumbent position against the wall.

Langfang. . . .

He had reached the very spot where the foreign army had been a month before — where a great battle had taken place. His master had described to him how urgent messages had come from here — four in the space of two days — declaring that the army was advancing as fast as possible — fighting as it advanced and repairing the railway which was being attacked and destroyed by countless levies. But after those messages, there had been a great silence which had lasted so long that a consuming fear had come. Had all been massacred? No one knew, no one had been able to discover the slightest hint as to what had happened. That was why he was here; that was why he had been sent out as a forlorn hope.

As he thought these thoughts he stole nearer the gaping doorway in spite of the splashing rain which blew in in great gusts. Now he pretended to be closely studying the prospect. He must find out something further.

“It is lifting a bit to the west,” he exclaimed, pointing with a hand to a spot where the inky blackness was indeed giving way to light. “If

the wind comes there will be a chance of its ceasing. I estimate the worst is over—the lightning and thunder are certainly less.”—He turned. “Tell me: was there not fighting here last month? It was so rumoured in our locality?”

The man nearest him answered. He seemed to speak reluctantly as of matters which he wished to forget.

“It is so. The foreign devils came along the railway as far as the station which is six *li* from here. For two days in our village we heard the firing which continued without ceasing even during the night. Some of our people saw the foreign soldiers on this embankment extending many *li*, with big guns on the trains. It was said that they were sailors from ships. But great numbers of our regiments surrounded them, and in the end all were killed.”

“All were killed—none were left?” cried the boy.

“Who knows!” rejoined the man sullenly as if this talk was increasingly distasteful to him. “So we were told. It was not our business. Some, who ventured near afterwards, picked up

weapons in the fields and many cartridges. There were cartridges scattered for many *li*,—baskets and baskets of them were gathered."

"But the dead — what of the dead?"

The man made an angry gesture.

"How could we know? Men armed with swords were camped everywhere and we were afraid. There were men without number. They destroyed the railway; and in the end every piece of iron and timber was carried away so that it could never be restored."

The boy's eyes never moved from the man's face. It was difficult to say whether he believed him or not.

"And now — where is the fighting now — have all the devils been driven into the sea?"

"We have no knowledge," rejoined the other gloomily. "Only we know that everywhere there is still danger. Men in our village were taken forcibly to drive wagons for our soldiers. At any moment it is said the soldiers may return."

The boy pretended to whimper:

"*Ai-ya*," he exclaimed again. "I must travel sixty *li* further to find my uncle. It is doubly

dangerous for me since I do not even know the road to Yangtsun." (He named a point twenty miles farther on.)

"Yangtsun — that was safe yesterday. Two of our men returned, having made their escape from the transport service. They declared that all the soldiers had gone."

"But where — in what direction?"

"It is not known," said the man curtly because the question revived his fears. "It was enough for our fellows to be set free — they did not stop to inquire what their captors might be doing."

The boy suddenly sat down with his knees drawn up against his chest in a characteristic attitude which signified excitement which he wished to conceal. He was not as cold as he had been because he was so greatly excited. His cotton clothing was indeed beginning to dry from the heat of his body; and as he now stripped off his shoes and cloth socks he felt almost comfortable in spite of his hunger.

"These are frightening days," he exclaimed sententiously. "Truly one hears enough every hour to make one fear to live."

Now he sorted all he had heard out on a system based on an intimate knowledge of his fellow-countrymen's methods in the face of clamant danger. Probably these men, after their kind, had fled far from their village into the back country on the first inkling of trouble — they had certainly disappeared as soon as the first shots had been fired in the battle they had described. What they had related was mere hearsay which had become greatly exaggerated with the passage of time. It was certain, of course, that the foreign army had retreated; otherwise the railway would never have been so completely destroyed. But he did not believe that all had been killed. That would mean that he would only find emptiness at the end of his journey. It had been rumoured that all foreign ships had been sunk or set fire to so as to remove all possibility of flight and to secure the death of all foreign men and women. Still he did not believe that any of these things had really happened. They had been tried perhaps. That was it — tried. Experience had taught him that the foreigners were far-seeing. They would never have allowed themselves to be trapped like that.

A sudden movement roused him from this brown study. In his fatigue he had nearly dozed off. Both the men had risen and were now standing at the doorway, calculating aloud their chances of getting home. The rain had certainly greatly slackened, and although it was still coming down heavily the worst was manifestly over. But in half-an-hour it would be completely dark: it was now or never for these two.

They suddenly made up their minds. Stripping themselves naked to the waist and rolling up their loose trousers to their thighs, they stepped out with a gruff word of farewell.

Once more the boy was left to his own devices.

The moment they were gone he peered into the corner where they had been sitting. Yes — they had been grass-cutting. Two large bundles of grass were stacked in the corner. Without compunction, he tore off the sweet-potato vine which bound the bundles; distributed the grass comfortably on the ground and then plunged luxuriously into it. He knew that they would not return until the morrow and by that time he would

be far away. The steady fall of the rain and the warmth of the grass soon lulled him to sleep, and in spite of his hunger, he slept with that deepness which only comes to those who toil.

When he finally awoke, the stillness and clearness of the night made him creep to the doorway and look out. It had entirely stopped raining, and every cloud had vanished. The waning moon, lower than ever in the horizon, shed a pale light over the water-logged country out of which peered the tall *kaoliang* in ominous black patches. As far as the eye could see it was like that; and as he stood and looked he knew that had it not been for the embankment he would have been as good as lost. It might be days before it was dry enough to travel more than short distances at a time on the roads. The sunken roads had become mere water-courses; and as for the mud in the fields that would be enough to defy the stoutest resolution.

He drew a deep breath. Certainly this was an undertaking such as he had never dreamed of. Yet he was not disheartened. He tightened his belt to lessen the gnawings of hunger and poked his fingers into his ribs which were stick-

ing out of his thin body in a queer way. For the second time since he had started he had gone for nearly a day without food. Yet with the curious eastern passivity, which can bear anything so long as it is a mere question of patience, he waited tranquilly until the first ray of dawn before he moved.

It came at last, at about four in the morning. Grasping his staff and his little bundle he started stumblingly along the embankment which ran as straight as an arrow to the sea. He knew that he must meet people very soon; for this being the only possible road, men from the villages would inevitably gravitate towards it.

It was hardly full daylight when he reached what remained of the nearest station. This was Langfang. The buildings had been burnt, and here and there were great gaps in the walls as from shell-fire. But it was not that which set him running: it was a long spiral of grey smoke rising from a lean-to of matting and boards which had been put up against one of the brick walls. Somebody was cooking—food was in sight. . . .

He loosened a string of cash in his belt as he

ran, forgetting everything in the immense desire to eat which overcame him. A woman appeared at the door of the lean-to. She was of the poorest class, with dishevelled hair and of slatternly appearance; but behind her was a man with a bowl in his hand.

"*Ta-ko* (elder brother)!" he exclaimed in the manner of the people. "I have not eaten since I lost my way yesterday morning. I have yet money for a meal. Give me to eat."

He handed over his diminutive holed coins as though they were all he had in the world. The woman took them and counted them carefully before she was satisfied. Then a bowl of little millet and a trifle of salted cabbage was set before him; and he ate as though he had never eaten before.

"I will have another," he said instantly, tendering the emptied bowl.

"What," cried the woman, "you would eat all our store for one small *tiao* of money?"

Disdainfully he took more of the small coins from his belt and placed them in her hand.

"Give me as much as I can eat and I will pay at the rate demanded."

This time two rough flour-cakes were added to the bowl of millet for the price; and when he had finished he was given a cup of poor tea.

"The money is exhausted," said the woman when he tried to get more. But now his spirits had risen and his defiant manner had returned.

"See here," he exclaimed, taking out and ringing on a stone one of the small silver coins which the master had given him to show that it was not base metal. "I have a good coin and as I must reach Yangtsun this evening to find my uncle I will purchase enough to carry me there."

"Silver!" exclaimed the woman in the same covetous tones the priest had used. "You carry silver!"

The coin passed from the hand of the man to the hand of the woman and then back again twice before a bargain was struck. But finally it was agreed that for the price he could take the sixteen small and very rough flour-cakes that were ready.

He ate four of them as he stood there, and stowed away the others, talking to the couple with his mouth full all the while. And when the woman's back was turned he nearly emptied

the coarse earthen tea-pot which she had prepared for the delectation of her man, feeling now that matters had been equalized. Then he scrambled up the embankment and hastened on.

The sun rose and he sweated just as the night before he had shivered. Presently he overtook a party of men with heavy saddlebags on their shoulders who said that they were bound for Yangtsun. His heart leaped within him as he heard that and without further ado he attached himself to them. They were all timid and frightened, but they said that there was nothing for it but to push on since their business demanded it. Also they were too much concerned about themselves and the dangers they might encounter to ask him a single question — excepting the inevitable one as to whether he had seen soldiers.

“It is said all of them have left Yangtsun,” they repeated again and again to him, apparently to reassure themselves. “Otherwise we should have never started. For ten days we have been waiting in a village and now that the rains have closed the roads we decided to risk

the journey along the railway. Several have done it safely already."

"You were wise, you were wise," agreed the boy, "I, too, have been forced to travel owing to death in our family. I go to find my uncle who is employed in a wine factory."

"So small and yet not alarmed," commented one wonderingly.

"What would you," rejoined the boy, "when a house is on fire even the timid must act."

This sententious remark, which he had often heard his seniors use, and which his ready memory had stored for use, so favourably impressed the three that presently when they rested they invited him to share their food. His prodigious appetite amused them — he ate everything that was offered down to the last crumb. But when one produced a leather bottle and a little pewter wine-cup and offered him a drink, his caution returned. He knew well from experience that drowsiness would rapidly come if he indulged himself.

"I am unable to use wine," he said in the set phrase of the native teetotaller.

"We trust that your uncle will reward you," they remarked approvingly.

"I am only a clumsy fellow unable to read and entirely untrained," he answered in the way which modesty and good manners demanded.

It was late afternoon before they saw the town of Yangtsun loom up in front of them. It was easy to make out, as a long low city wall flanked it. Several others had joined the party and the conversation was general, each trying to pick up something from his fellows which would reassure him.

"It is said that our soldiers are massed, less than twenty *li* from here, and that there is the remnants of a foreign army who have taken refuge in an arsenal opposed to them," said the latest arrival.

"Is that supposition true, do you think?" asked the boy in an undertone of the three men with the saddlebags.

"We fear so," they said in the same undertone, "for the seaport is closed to all. Our business is there and many bales of our wool are involved. Our plan is to remain in hiding in Yangtsun until it is possible to move. One way

or another the fighting is sure to go. Then, by some path, we may be able to reach the seaport which we must do to save our interests from ruin."

The boy nodded.

"The soldiers are the only problem. If we avoid them all is well. There may be a way known in this town."

Now he determined to remain attached to this trio — for the time being at least — telling them when necessary that he was unable to find his uncle because he had fled.

CHAPTER XXIII

HE worked ceaselessly in his head at a plan of action as they cautiously approached the township, which had once been a place of importance but had now fallen into the greatest decay. He wished to be fully provided with subterfuges against all possible contingencies. He had a deep feeling of excitement — the conviction that the great test of his ability was slowly coming nearer. For now there were but twenty miles of the journey left, and at any moment it might become imperative for him to risk everything in a quick forward rush. His intelligent eyes were here, there, and everywhere.

The others were likewise very much on the *qui vive*. They talked incessantly of all possible perils, commiserating with one another at being abroad in such times as these. Each step forward seemed to be taken more reluctantly than the last. Now that they were face to face with real danger, they had every wish to turn back.

A few hundred yards from the broken mud wall of the township the whole party halted as by a common impulse, wondering aloud what they should do. Then, very deliberately, they approached some country folks who had stood watching them from the distance, half-hidden behind some trees. With friendly calls and waving hands they marched up, hoping that they would hear something reassuring.

Nevertheless these people could tell them very little. They declared, however, that the reports that all the soldiers had gone for good were not quite true. Small detachments were constantly arriving and disappearing, every man in the provincial militia being mustered out to fight the foreign invader. Only that morning a body of infantry had passed this way, but whether they were still in the township they had not heard. As for the foreign devils, they had not been driven into the sea. On the contrary they had become stronger. They held all the country round the seaport, and it was said that many thousands more were pouring in. In any case fighting would continue for a long time. The foreign army was determined to march on the

capital. It was not known whether the provincial troops could entirely stop them. There were disagreements among the commanders already; and shots had been exchanged.

This news was so surprising to the three wool-dealers, that they sat down on a fallen tree-trunk and began talking to one another in deep undertones. The boy muttered angrily to himself at the stupidity of these peasants. He suspected that the wool-dealers were concerting a new plan whereby they might slip away round the contending armies and reach their destination by a totally new route. Their one and only interest was their stock of wool. They had already mentioned the feasibility of making a great detour to the south to gain the coast. Then, by embarking on a junk a hundred miles or so away, they could safely reach the harbour without seeing a single soldier. This would be no doubt wise for them, but for him it would mean a delay of many days—a disastrous delay. The boy cursed them under his breath for their cowardice and wondered whether he should not leave them at once. On the other hand, if he went on alone he would be stripped of protection. Masked by

their presence, no one could suspect him of being a secret messenger.

"And is there security here?" inquired one of the dealers at last terminating this confidential discussion.

The peasants shook their heads.

"How is it possible to talk of security, when we fear at any moment the resumption of fighting? As it is, until the *kaoliang* is cut there will be no protection from the robber-bands who lurk in the tall grain far and wide, following close on the heels of the soldiers."

"Robber bands!" cried the wool-dealers despairingly, starting up with fear.

"Yes," chorussed the peasants. "Here the bands have made so much in ransoms that they can afford to rest a while from their labours — everything has been taken from us, all our poor savings. But the country to the southeast is not yet clear. We have just heard of a man at Ko-chuan who has been carried off and held for a big sum, the ransom even including firearms. Such is the audacity of these brigands that they force their victims to send their families into the towns to buy their weapons. We ourselves

were watching your honourable selves approaching, fearing some wile or stratagem; for often does it happen that these men ply their trade in the guise of innocent travellers."

The oldest of the three wool-dealers, who had grey hair and a face mottled from over-indulgence in wine, gave voice to his fears openly and unashamedly. But Wang the Ninth smiled to himself, greatly relieved. Now he knew that these three would never dare to go to the south-east to reach the coast.

"This is indeed a country without administration! The people are oppressed by dangers from within and without and it is impossible to know where to flee for safety. And the Sword Society, have we them also to expect?" Although the old wool-dealer ended the phrase indignantly, he used a polite term for fear that there might be adherents listening.

"They are those also inside the walls—" rejoined one of the countrymen, pointing to the township. "But at the beginning of the trouble the soldiers fired on them for failing to make good their promise that they were invulnerable

and could instantly defeat the foreign devils. They are not highly valued here."

"We are saved from one ceremony," rejoined the dealer irately. "Six times have I kowtowed in the dust since the Sword Society was established."

"The day is not early," interrupted Wang the Ninth, anxious to make retreat impossible. "We have learnt all there is to learn. Those who intend to proceed had better delay no longer since night will soon fall."

He had been squatting motionless on his buttocks — tracing designs in the mud with his staff whilst his quick eyes looked slily from one speaker to another. Now he rose and picked his way forward through the morass which lay ahead of them, plunging and sliding in the mud and often pausing to take breath. The heavy rain had reduced this low-lying ground to a veritable quagmire, making progress very difficult even for one as unburdened as he was. As for the unfortunate wool-dealers, laden with their heavy saddle-bags, they had not gone far before their cries of distress became hearty and real. They

were so badly mired that it was necessary for the others to lend a hand in dragging them out.

At last they gained the tumble-down gate of the township, splashed to the shoulders and panting and sweating. Errant dogs barked at them; but the shuttered and miserable aspect of the main street showed that the place had been totally deserted by the inhabitants.

The eldest wool-dealer was now quite exhausted and raised his voice in loud, piteous complaints.

"I should have never undertaken this journey," he exclaimed, stopping short to wipe the perspiration from his lined face. "From early morning have I had great misgivings which have oppressed me. Ruin is better than such travels."

"*Tso* — let us proceed," said Wang the Ninth stoutly, aiming a blow at a barking cur which ran off yelping. "We shall find a sleeping-place somehow. In any case it is too late to turn back, for whither should we go?"

He walked on briskly, peering keenly in every direction, and not at all alarmed, for he knew

that no one would hurt a boy when there were men with saddlebags accompanying him.

The township had indeed been picked clean by looters — that was amply clear from the ruined appearance of every shop front. The robbers had vied with the soldiers, and what was left had been rejected by both. But at last they reached a big caravansary that in times of peace catered to the cart-trade; and there sitting at a broken table in the central yard was a single servant eating his evening meal as if nothing had happened. The man declared that he had been left by his master with the promise of a great reward if he saved the premises from fire; but as for food or lodging there was nothing to be had.

A great parleying ensued; and finally in return for hard cash hidden food was produced. When Wang the Ninth had eaten his share he felt extraordinarily drowsy. Going into the first rough room he could find, he stretched himself on the raised brick *k'ang* and fell instantly asleep.

The talk about robbers, however, made him dream bad dreams and he saw whole hosts of evil men who conspired to torture him. Yet

through it all — in spite of his alarm — he always seemed to see his master, and to hear the same strange foreign words which had urged him forward before. Once in the night he awoke with a cry, fearing for his life, and peered out. Then he saw through the broken paper windows the three wool-dealers still sitting in the courtyard drinking wine from their leather bottles and babbling their fears. The shadows from the waning moon made them look queer and strange; they were like men submerged. Half their bodies was hidden in darkness, and only when they lifted their arms to drink could he trace them clearly. The inn-servant, who had been included in this jollification, was asleep with his head on the table. His loud breathing was punctuated by groans as though the wine he had drunk was torturing him. Silently the boy crept back to his rough couch and slept once more.

When morning came he went out down the street to see whatever there was to see; but he met no one or saw no signs of life, excepting a miserable beggar who disappeared at once and whom he had no wish to follow. On returning

to the inn he waited until the wool-dealers were awake; and then gave them a long account of his observations.

"It's a bad business. Everything has been taken, not a mule, not an animal, not a pig, not a chicken is to be found. There's a few beggars — that is all. My uncle, whom I came to find, has fled with the rest and all my journeying has proved fruitless."

"Then what will you do?" they inquired.

"I have no plan," he rejoined, making his face look very glum. "I must take things as I find them."

But soon afterwards, when he found the eldest wool-dealer alone, he made this proposition to him:

"My money is exhausted, so only for my food will I travel with you, finding the road and giving you early warning of danger. It will be well for you to have such a one as me, since I am fleet off foot and not timid by nature."

"We shall see, we shall see," rejoined the old man testily. "The cost is unimportant, but first must we wait here to discover the nature of the road ahead of us."

All that day was spent in fitful debate. The inn-servant, who declared he was of this district, for a handsome bribe undertook to find out from villagers the state of the road towards the next township which was ten miles off. But Wang the Ninth, who followed him stealthily, found that he went nowhere, only sitting down for a long time on a block of stone in a back street where he was well hidden; and finally returning to say that there was no trace of soldiers and that all was quiet within a great radius. Wang the Ninth began to suspect that he was in league with the robbers, and that was why he dared to remain in a place where there were hardly a dozen souls. But these suspicions he kept to himself for he was forming his plan.

That night he explained it privately to the eldest wool-dealer, drawing lines on the ground to show his meaning. He said:

“I have discovered that the river to the sea is only a few *li* distant from here, and that all the country is so badly flooded that if we cross the stream we can go by boat through the marshes for a long way. Then we can reach a point only a few *li* distant from the harbour. There will be

no soldiers about, for what would soldiers be doing in marshes? As for the inn-servant he is a rascal. It would be well to leave here before he attempts some dangerous game."

The wool-dealer was so impressed by this common-sense that he called the others, and after much discussion it was finally settled that the next day they would make the attempt.

At dawn they started, creeping out of the inn very carefully so as to give no hint of their departure to the inn-servant who lay soundly asleep. They were out of the township very soon, seeing only two people who ran and hid the moment they caught sight of them. Now hastening due south they made for the river.

The sandy roads had greatly dried during the time they had delayed in the town; and now it was possible to keep to the paths which led from village to village. A couple of hours from the township they fell in with some men who were travelling in the same direction; and after these had heard where they had passed two nights they congratulated them on their escape.

"It is known that all the people in that district are in league with the brigands," explained

one stout fellow who carried a staff tipped with iron and who had a big roll of bedding on his shoulder. "It can only be that the inn-drawer was waiting for his band to return before killing and robbing you."

It was Wang the Ninth's hour of triumph.

"Is not that what I declared?" he cried. "Lucky have we been to escape. From the manner in which the fellow answered my questions I knew suspicion attached to him."

"This *tu-ti* (apprentice) is worthy of his wage," said the eldest wool-dealer approvingly. "Certain it is that his abilities are not small."

On they went discussing their plans with the newcomers and picking up what news there was. Long before noon they caught sight of a sail, which was quite unexpected since the river was entirely hidden. Wang the Ninth ran on fleetly ahead. But when he caught sight of the bright red and blue tunics and the black turbans on the boat, he ran into the tall grain and signed violently with his hands to the others to hide. They, too, dropped out of sight like marionettes.

From out of the *kaoliang* the boy now peered,

his brown face hardly distinguishable from the soil. Now he worked his way forward like a scout.

The boat sailed on and presently there was a sharp crack from a rifle. Gaining in courage he crept into the reeds on the very edge of the river so that he could see.

The soldiers were firing violently now one after the other. The boy's quick mind instantly jumped to the right conclusion. Being powerless to navigate a boat properly, they were pursuing and shooting at the boatmen who had fled.

Suddenly the vessel grounded a few hundred yards away. Wang the Ninth saw the soldiers, furious with rage, leap one by one from the boat and scramble on shore. The sound of firing became fainter, showing that the pursuit was leading them far away.

It was now or never. Fairly crazy with excitement he ran back to the wool-dealers who lay tremblingly awaiting the upshot.

"Now is the time for us," he cried. "There is not a soul left. Let us seize the boat and cross to the south bank. Then we are safe."

He did not wait for a reply: he ran on ahead. The wool-dealers and the two men they had met followed cautiously a good many yards behind, doubting his words yet hoping that they were true. But when they saw him reach the boat and signal that all was clear, they ran too; and in a hurried clumsy manner got on board and by their united efforts pushed the boat off, towards the south shore.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE river was less than a hundred yards wide here, and the five men and the boy had enough skill to get the boat across with rapidity. The big man with the iron-pronged stick, seizing an oar, rowed frantically. One of the wool-dealers aided him by poling with desperation until the water became too deep. And as a little breeze filled the hoisted sail, they swung on to the opposite shore at a point far lower down than they had embarked.

It was this circumstance which saved their lives. For Wang the Ninth, sitting astride of the tiller, and turning back constantly to look suddenly gave a great leap and was out of the boat before there was time to realize what he was doing.

“*Lai-la, lai-la* (they have come) !” he screamed as he tumbled across the mud with the agility of a frog. He had seen a glint of red in the reeds on the opposite shore — just a glint — but that was enough.

The others, being less nimble, crawled out

using the sail as a screen. Then, trembling violently, all of them disappeared quickly enough into the reeds which grew rank and high. Distant voices shouting curses were audible as they went; but the rifles they feared did not speak. The soldiers were running along the opposite bank fairly mad with rage; it was evident that they knew the country and were holding their fire until they could be certain of their quarry.

The fugitives had not gone twenty yards before they discovered that the great clumps of reeds were no real protection; for the ground was so marshy that the only safe road was the tracking-path beside the river. Already they were surrounded by mud and water. The soldiers counted on their certain reappearance when they would begin their shooting.

It was the big fellow with the iron-pronged stick who explained this to them all in a guttural whisper, when they reached the end of the solid ground and stood in an irresolute group. Some wild-fowl rising almost from under their feet with a screech startled them all so badly that they turned deadly pale.

"A pretty dilemma!" exclaimed one of the wool-merchants in a hoarse whisper. "We cannot advance; we dare not retreat. And if we remain here too long, in the end the soldiers will find another boat to carry them across and exact vengeance, or perhaps fire chance shots, hoping to bring us down. Far better had we never moved."

But Wang the Ninth was not idle. He had stripped off his shoes and his trousers and had commenced wading in a new direction. Soon he was lost to sight, even his splashing becoming inaudible. But after a long wait he reappeared, forcing his way through the reeds from a different direction.

"I have found a bank of dry land. How far it extends I have not learnt, but if all follow it may be that we can reach safety."

There was nothing to do but to imitate his example, and soon all were splashing through the mud and water to where he awaited them. A half-submerged bank of earth, which may have been a forgotten dyke, stretched away through the reeds, and although it soon narrowed down to a path just broad enough to walk on, it led them

far away from the river — straight to the south.

Their spirits rose so rapidly as they progressed that now they began to talk almost gaily.

“It is a reed-cutters’ path, that is absolutely certain,” asserted Wang the Ninth. “Soon we must reach a village, for this is an important trade and I know well how this business is carried on.”

“This boy is right,” agreed the man with the iron-pronged stick. “Certainly he is right: there is already smoke from some chimney.”

It was even as he said. Soon from out of the dense reeds they heard the sound of cries and a scurrying of feet.

“*Shui* — (who is that)?” a voice called threateningly.

“We are travellers — we require to be shown the road,” they called, one after the other, keeping up a perpetual chorus for fear of what would happen if they remained silent.

Rounding the last clump of reeds they saw a village of mud huts. In front of a small open space, on which were piled masses of dried reeds, stood a big fellow stripped to the waist with a formidable jingal in his hand; and at his side

were some barking dogs. He was evidently prepared for the worst.

His expression slowly changed as they came in view. The appearance of the wool-dealers, heavily laden with their saddle-bags and greatly exhausted by their efforts, was certainly eminently peaceful; and now as their chorus of explanations redoubled, a new-found courage displayed itself in his roughness.

"What talk of seeking a road is this!" he exclaimed angrily. "This is a small poor village surrounded by water, where we risk starvation from year to year and where there is nothing for others."

They answered him in a storm of talk speaking so much of soldiers that fear returned to him.

"If they pursue you it is best for you to proceed quickly," he rejoined, not listening to them. "Here are women and children who cannot be imperilled."

"But the road, the road," they cried. "We cannot fail to pay you your stipulated price."

At the mention of money the reed-cutter rubbed his face with one horny hand.

“Those who ask aid must make it worth while,” he declared ambiguously. “I was left here by our folk to protect the households. If I go who is there to insure safety?”

A long and animated argument commenced; and as it progressed, slowly and cautiously the denizens of the village approached — slatternly women in torn blue clothing with babies in their arms, and half-grown girls, and small boys, all the offspring of a mating carried on as in primeval forests, and now stricken with fear.

At length the price was settled, and the reed-cutter led them to where a small flat-bottomed boat was concealed in the reeds. This it was necessary to carry a considerable distance; but finally it was launched where there was a clear water-passage. It was just big enough to embark them all; and with the reed-cutter poling them, they slowly travelled away from the scene of the day's adventure.

The sun was already low when the man stopped and pointed to a spot a few hundred yards away.

“There will I take you,” he said. “Farther

I cannot go. From there a good road leads to the seaport which is distant some eighty *li*."

"Eighty *li*," they cried in alarm. "This morning when we started we were but sixty *li* off."

"But you have travelled far to the south-east. This is the southeastern road. In any case it is eighty *li*."

They paid the price agreed upon and started off without further discussion. Although Wang the Ninth had chattered all the way in the boat now he had nothing to say.

He was thinking — thinking of what the villagers had said two days ago about the country to the southeast. This was the robber country. He did not dare to give voice to his suspicions because that might bring the whole party to a halt.

A mile or two further on a small green snake slid across the road and disappeared into the undergrowth.

"A snake crosses the road," he cried. "There will be heavy weather soon."

A few hundred yards farther on a second snake

crossed the road going so rapidly and viciously that it was almost impossible to follow with the eyes.

The boy opened his mouth but closed it without speaking. Two snakes — what did two snakes mean? It was something unlucky he had once heard; but he never thought that it might simply come from the undergrowth being disturbed by hidden feet. He was trying to think of the explanation — he knew there was an explanation — when the warning was made clear. A half-a-dozen men, with hideous painted masks over their faces, leaped out of the growing grain and fired from their hips. Crack, crack, crack went the shots. Wang the Ninth, stricken with alarm, threw himself instinctively on the ground, and wriggled into the *kaoliang* amidst the cries and groans of the others who never left the road.

He was alone once more — in the growing grain — perhaps twenty miles from his destination.

CHAPTER XXV

HE spent a horrible night. Fear gained him completely, and he sobbed to himself for many hours as he wandered in the blackness of the fields.

He did not know whether his companions had been killed or whether they had been merely robbed and left on the roadside; but their despairing cries sounded in his ears unendingly, and he seemed to hear the vicious whistle of the bullets and to feel their wounds. A great compassion for the old wool-dealer who had been kind to him wrung his heart so acutely that several times he cried aloud. He sat down only to start up again — expecting to see phantom shapes, tormented with the fear that the wool-dealers' distressed spirits would for ever haunt him. Not until day was dawning did he care to lie down and even then he knew no sleep.

He tried to calculate how many days had passed since he had left the capital — was it six, seven or eight? And he was still wrestling with the problem, still attempting to thrust himself

through obstacles which he did not understand. Sometimes he wondered why he had attempted this task. It was too big for a boy; yet he had been told that that was just the reason why he might succeed. He wondered why he did not give it up: he was not bound to go on. No one could possibly know what he did. Now he remembered how the inn-servant, when he was paid for a certain service, merely went and sat down in a lonely spot. Then, when he thought that thought anger gained him. His doggedness and his loyalty were aroused. He was not a mean fellow like that inn-servant. He would not turn back or surrender.

He must have dozed during these hours of dawn; for he awoke to find himself shivering under a fine rain which dripped through the grain and covered his face with dew. Rousing himself, he sat up and began munching some flour-cakes he still had with him. Now he made a vow that that very day he would push through and encounter his destiny cost what it might. Tightening his belt he started off.

As he scrambled through the fields he became gradually aware of a low thunder on the horizon.

The sound puzzled him for the rain had stopped and the sun had come out from behind the clouds and it was fair weather and very hot. And yet as he walked this thunder increased — not slowly but very rapidly. At length he paused to listen.

“*Shen-mo* (what is it),” he exclaimed aloud in his perplexity, impelled to talk to relieve himself, and wondering whether the tiny paper wad in one ear was spoiling his hearing.

Then at last he struck his hands together and babbled madly in his excitement.

“*Ta-p’ao* (big guns),” he shouted. “They are coming, they are coming!”

He ran now until he was completely out of breath, changing his run to a fast walk and then back to a trot as soon as he could.

In this frantic way he covered several miles, his face beaded with perspiration. The air was shaking with the concussions now and his excitement was so great that he trembled from head to foot. He knew it was the foreign army exploding in wrath at finding its path barred: he pictured to himself the rival soldiery struggling together. . . .

He ran on directly towards the growing sounds. He was on the main road now and the dry alkali soil, being unsuitable for any kind of cultivation, opened up in great vistas of space.

At length he saw the river again and on it boats, many boats, loaded with people, crossing from one bank to the other.

He made his way towards them pantingly. Almost before he knew it, he had met a crowd of men, women, children, all crying and talking together, driven in front of the rising storm like wild animals before a prairie-fire. The deserted countryside was giving up its victims: every hiding-place was being emptied by this approaching human storm.

He did not stop to ask questions: he ran on towards the river. The boats were going backwards and forwards steadily and quickly, the boatmen working like madmen to save the mass of women and children.

He waded into the water and jumped on one boat that was just pushing off to go back for more people, with a story about his mother who had been left behind; but the boatmen never so much as glanced at him. Once near the opposite

shore he jumped knee-deep into the water, to avoid the oncoming rush of people, not caring what had happened as long as he got through.

In the village above the river there was not a soul — every living thing had fled. But the long deserted street seemed garlanded with coming events. The air was pulsating with sound. He could hear the rattle of musketry, very fast and hard. He clambered up a high bank and found that he overlooked a gaunt plain. It was alive with tiny little figures running in many directions. For long he waited to know who they were, but presently there was a big jet of smoke and flame and the sound of an angry explosion which floated across to him slowly and reluctantly. The foreign army was throwing shell on to the plain: the running men were his fellow-countrymen fleeing from the menace of their wrath.

But where was the foreign army — where?

He began running along towards the edge of the plain. Very soon he tumbled over two men in red and blue tunics, with dishevelled queues, who were splotted with blood, lying on the ground as if they were held down by an iron

hand. As he ran he could hear their voices wailing "*Chiu-ming, chiu-ming* (save our lives)"; but he never paused.

Now he was well on to the plain. All the running men had disappeared. A few motionless dots showed where some others had fallen but apart from that all was bare. The hidden army must have eyes that could see; for the guns had ceased magically and the musketry rattle too. A great emptiness filled heaven and earth and his fear grew so that once again his knees shook.

He fell on his knees.

On his knees he waited and then he saw. Men on horses had suddenly appeared riding fast with long lances in their hands, streaming on to the plain in irregular streams. From a very great distance he saw that their faces were black, for their brown turbans showed that and also their hands and arms. The foreign army had devils in league with them — all the tales of his childhood came back to him.

And yet he did not move — he made no movement save to kowtow for mercy with his head. But when the black horsemen caught sight of him, they lowered their lances and rode at him

playfully, accepting his surrender by reining in and doing him no hurt. Then it was that he was inspired and began repeating incessantly, with great explanatory waves of the hands back to where he had come from, "he will go," pronouncing the remembered words in the native way, *Hei wei ko*, which made them a strangely changed English.

The troopers, vastly puzzled, clustered round him, talking fast to one another in an unknown language. They suspected something of the truth but were not sure. India looked at China with inquiring eyes.

He stood up.

"*Hei wei ko*," he repeated more and more insistently, waving back with his hand to where he had come from and pointing at them insistently to show that he sought their aid. Then, with a swift movement, he took a thorn he had threaded unto his tunic out and sat again on the ground and picked at his ear, very carefully, slowly forcing out the tiny ball of tissue-paper.

The mob of horsemen watched him breathlessly. East watched East and wondered whether it was a miracle since miracles are

known by word of mouth to all as well as found in books. But when he had the tiny ball of tissue-paper in the hollow of his hand, and spread it out and showed them the English writing on it, they gave a great shout of understanding. Almost before he knew it one horseman had spurred his horse alongside him and shifting his lance, had slung him up behind him with a single powerful swing. Now they called to him and told him with signs to hold on tightly. With the boy clasping him round the waist, the horseman began galloping back in a mad gallop.

Beyond the edge of the gaunt plain, through the growing grain, columns of the foreign army were marching — many men, white men as well as black men in such an array as the boy had never seen before. There were thick columns of them, raising choking dust as they marched. The horseman galloped on calling something as he passed and causing all eyes to turn. He made straight for a mounted group preceded by a man with a small flag. Wang the Ninth knew that they were important men for the oldest had white hair. There, reining in abruptly the trooper began his story, pointing to the boy who had

slipped to the ground, and who was gazing at them all as if in a dream.

Then the oldest one, who had quite white hair, called to him and when he had received the tiny piece of paper, he read it and passed it to the others with much talk, finally putting his hand into his pocket and giving the boy a gold coin.

Wang the Ninth took it with an awe-struck expression. He had never seen gold before; he fingered it with eyes round with surprise. He had heard that it was worth twenty or thirty times the value of silver.

And before he had recovered from this, and while the others were passing the paper from hand to hand, a foreigner, who could speak his language appeared and commenced questioning him and writing down his answers. Every one listened as if they could not hear enough. All the adventures he had passed through he recounted, speakly quickly and volubly, the foreigner who spoke his language translating. Later he told him that it had been reported for many days that all the foreigners in the capital had been killed, and that therefore his message had lifted a great load from their hearts. For

although they were now advancing as fast as possible a great army in a hostile country could only advance slowly.

Presently he was given food and water, and he walked alongside the horse of the great general into the village many eyes watching him, the news having passed far and wide that he was the messenger who had at last arrived, having done a great feat although he was but a small boy.

CHAPTER XXVI

SO it went on for several days with the dust of the marching army thick round him. He began to distinguish the many nationalities in this great throng, and to realize that there were large differences which at first he had not understood. He found that all these men, whom his fellow-countrymen lumped together indiscriminately in the opprobrious epithet of devils, marched separately. There were stories of open disagreements which reached him in whispers from the native carriers and carters who had been impressed into their service and who were marching with the baggage.

“They do not speak the same language,” he heard declared again and again. “Sometimes we must rise in the middle of the night and start suddenly because the others have gone ahead, breaking their word. Thus there is confusion and counter-orders, and we do not know how it will end.”

To all this he nodded his head wisely and replied:—

"It is always like that. I, who have served them for a year and more, know well. The most violent lead this way—the others follow obediently. There is not long discussion as with us, each point being duly considered. With them it is the quick plan that is found most desirable."

All the carriers were closely guarded because many of them had tried to escape. They lived in constant fear of battles, believing that all of them would be killed. Whenever there was the sound of distant firing they became concerned saying "Now our fate will soon be decided." In this manner did the army march on.

On the fourth day Wang the Ninth was called before the great general by the foreigner who spoke his language; and he went a little reluctantly because he feared what was coming. There was a large gathering of officers in many different uniforms, all talking earnestly together under the trees because of the heat. He knew from the drawings and plans that passed from hand to hand that it had to do with him—for that was the way it had happened when his master had sent him on this journey.

He waited patiently his eyes following every movement and trying to guess what it was about. The old general, when he had finished discussing something, turned to the foreigner who spoke his language and handed him a piece of paper with writing on it, of a bigger size than the one he had brought. Wang the Ninth had hoped that this might not come. Now he was sure that this was the answer to the message he had carried, and that he would have to go.

The interpreter turned to him and made this long speech :

“Our Governing General bids me tell you that he has sent many messages during the past weeks but it is evident from the paper you carried that none have reached their destination. Thus of all who have been despatched you are the only one who has been successful. Whether the others accepted the charge for the money payment with no intention of forcing their way through, or whether they were captured, we do not know. But the loss of messages has occasioned military danger and therefore plans have been changed: for in our messages we told how we would advance and now it is necessary to

change our plans. Our general hopes that you will not refuse to go back as speedily as you came, since our people in the capital may lose heart and be overpowered unless they know that we shall soon arrive."

The boy fumbled with his hands.

"By good fortune I reached you," he said at length, "but it is not certain whether this good fortune will take me back. That I can travel quicker than the army is not to be believed." Thus he spoke hoping to be relieved of this duty.

The interpreter was very gentle with him because he was demanding a great sacrifice. He explained every point carefully.

"It is true the army is now advancing fast," he declared. "But there are many tens of thousands of men belonging to many nations and it is necessary for each nation to be consulted. Some are ready to proceed more quickly than the others and it may be some ten days before we stand in front of the walls of the capital. Then there is the fighting to be considered. This may greatly delay us. It is true we have so far triumphed easily. But the future is ever uncertain with an army. You, who are fleet of foot

may easily cover the distance, in three days."

"It is not so easy," said the boy now frowning hard. "Eight days did I waste in overcoming obstacles to reach you. Now although the distance is less all the roads are watched and full of soldiers. Much will I do for my master; but should I now be captured there will be no mercy for me and I shall die the slow death."

"Listen," rejoined the young man. "We know that careful watch is being kept, and that the enemy has many scouts and spies even marching with us. But for all this we have a plan. We will send you by horse to the northwest with some horsemen. I myself will go too — so that you can approach the capital by an unaccustomed road where there will be less danger. Already have we found that only the direct roads are fortified: twenty miles to the north the country is undisturbed and unguarded. This our horsemen have reported to us."

He continued explaining. For many minutes he talked, showing each point and how easy it would be; but all the time that he was talking Wang the Ninth was frowning because fear had gained him.

"If it must be, it must be," he said, consenting at length, with reluctance in his manner. "My master shall not say that I failed him. But I am afraid — great fear has gained me."

The young man laughed.

"That is not true fear. That is but hesitation and doubt. Who will face danger willingly and not hesitate if by another way there is safety? But now it is a question of great moment. All ask your help."

The boy flushed.

"I shall go," he said abruptly.

Now the general came to him, and patted him on the shoulder as he stood there and spoke in his own language commending him, so the interpreter declared, and great pride filled him. Yet afterwards forebodings returned to him; and he sat down in the fields with the message which had been given him in his belt, and his eyes looking into the distance.

That afternoon the young man rode for many miles with him up behind a trooper and with other horsemen accompanying them. They went at a gallop far to the north. Only when the sunlight was gone did they set him down on a

rutted road that coiled away to the southwest. Quite near now were hills and mountains.

"From here it is exactly 120 *li* — forty miles — to the nearest Gate of the capital," declared the young man in his fluent vernacular. "It would be possible in a single day to walk thither. But allow five days, then one extra day to make your way through the city to the foreign quarter." He unslung a big bag of blue cloth. "Here is sufficient to eat — here is food for six days so that you need ask no one for assistance."

The boy took the package. There was a set expression on his face.

"I am ready," he said abruptly. "For two hours I shall travel. Then I must rest. At dawn I start again. If I have good fortune tomorrow I shall reach the city."

He scrambled on to the side-path running along the edge of the fields of millet, and was soon lost to view.

CHAPTER XXVII

THIS time his emotions were different from what they had been on his first lonely journey. Then the whole world had been spread before him like some feast, and his flight through danger had possessed a sacrificial quality. The freedom after the days of confinement with the sound of dropping rifle-fire ever in his ears, had given life a new zest. The experience had been wonderful. The fascination of coming upon the overwhelming army had been like a dream from a theatre. Now, however, the feast was over. He had exhausted everything. He knew what was before him, just as he knew what was behind him.

Yet even in such circumstances his sense of duty held him to his pledge. The Chinese are like that, doing exactly what they undertake to do, in spite of some misconceptions which have lately grown up. He travelled until it was night — slept in the fields — rose at the first streak of dawn and pushed on with stubborn energy until

he was exhausted. Rubbing his tired legs, he wondered whether he dared enter a village to find out exactly where he was.

The country had become strange to him for he had travelled northwards along the curve of a vast semi-circle. Very close towards the west the mountains and foot-hills of the Mongolian Passes now frowned down on him, the barren land looking purple in the sunlight which poured over the mountain brim. Twice he had seen trains of camels pass slowly along as if all the world were at peace. But warned by their clanking bells, each time he had hid himself until they were far away. Several times, too, during that day he had also seen low clouds of dust hanging in the air above roadways; but even his expert eyes could not tell at such distances whether the dust signified flocks of sheed or cavalcades of bellicose horsemen.

He had had too many narrow escapes to wish to risk anything more. He was wandering between the fringes of two rival armies and the prospect was uninviting. He feared potential enemies; there were potential enemies everywhere; and as he sat and rested he shook his

head. It was the thought that he was doing what the other messengers had failed to do which was the most disconcerting thing to him.

Why had the others not done what they had undertaken to do? All the time that he rested this thought recurred to him with ever greater force. Perhaps there was some secret reason; they knew something he did not know. Suspicion began to gain him; for suspicion is the twin-brother of fear and the twain can never be long separated.

He had been weak to accept — he ought to have refused. There were plenty of his fellow-countrymen with the advancing army who could have been ordered to do the same work. To go one way was all right — it had been right for him to obey his master and go for succour. But to come back: to do the thing twice — no. . . .

He looked to the right — he looked to the left; and angrily he rose and hitched his trousers higher and tightened his belt. The sun had gone down behind the mountains now, and the perspiration which had covered his body had fully dried. Two hours more and it would be pitch-dark again — long shadows were even now creep-

ing into the mountain hollows and making them seem blue-black.

He began to feel lonely at the prospect of another night in the fields.

Yet he started off, wondering how he would dare to go through the gates of the capital on the morrow. For the capital was not more than a dozen miles away; it could not be more than that. Soon he would be able to see the outline of the city walls.

Onward he went now passing patches growing Indian corn; for the soil had become too arid for anything else to grow. There was no one about in the fields since the harvest was still far off; and this loneliness preyed on him more and more.

Onward and onward he went in the on-coming dusk. Then, just below the shoulder of the hill which he was rounding, he saw something which did not belong to the landscape. Presently he made out quite clearly a little knot of people. They seemed to him to be standing motionless, as if something chained them to the spot — as if something had caused them to become inanimate. That at once attracted his attention.

Cautiously he approached, keeping near a large patch of Indian corn into which he could run if there were any indications of hostility. But nobody turned, nobody paid the slightest attention to him. Fifteen or twenty people were standing there in a circle gazing at something fixedly.

He approached so noiselessly that only when he was a short distance away was his presence noticed. Then his small, slight person caused a commotion and several commenced to run away. Only when they saw that it was only a boy did their strange panic subside.

It was necessary for him to push his way past the people to see. With his eyes wide open from emotion he suddenly understood what it was.

"*Ai-ai-ai!*" he exclaimed several times loudly and involuntarily.

A man had been buried alive in the earth up to his neck and the ground stamped in round his head. He was quite dead now. His head, which lolled to one side, and his glassy eyes showed that; the anguish had long passed. A

little piece of paper, with one big character written in black on it, was stuck on a millet-stalk beside him.

For a full minute the boy gazed silently as the others were doing, awe-struck and yet utterly fascinated. For death is like that in the East; it seems to fascinate the people because of its unutterable finality.

"What is it — what does the writing say?" he inquired at last in a hoarse whisper, nudging the man next to him.

The man turned:

"The soldiers caught this one carrying a written message from the foreign devils and they buried him thus so that he might die."

Very pale, the boy waited before he spoke again.

"Has he been here long?" he inquired at last.

"Five days. Only this morning did the soldiers leave, being sure that he was dead."

Then silence fell on the group again. Several generations had passed since this old Tartar torture had been seen, although the tradition of it still lived and was known to all.

The boy remained there after all had gone without a movement or a remark, pretending that he was absorbed by the spectacle. Then, when he was quite sure that he was alone, with a furious gesture he pulled up the little stick decorated with the cruel character, and broke it to pieces. Now falling on his knees, he began heaping the earth over the dead man's head. He worked quickly with his naked hands which were hurt and bruised by the stony soil, but soon he had made a little mound which obliterated the hideous sight. If he had been asked why he had done this he could not have said. But it soothed him and somehow seemed a loyal and profitable action. Then, with fear in his heart he hastened off, running swiftly in spite of the darkness.

As he ran he thought. It was the written message, of course, which had betrayed the man. He had not been cunning enough. Wang the Ninth, with a sudden movement, pulled out the piece of paper he was carrying in his belt. It was too big to do anything else with it. Rolling it up tightly he suddenly thrust it into his mouth, and swallowed it down with a gulp.

He sat down after that with his legs wide apart, wondering whether it would kill him. In a country where suicide by the method of swallowing is common, his fear was not strange. He was not afraid of death — what he feared was the pain, the long delay. Mechanically he rubbed his chest, and presently all discomfort passed.

“It has gone done,” he exclaimed, rising and taking a few steps. Then he thought of something else, and sat down once more. Taking off one of his shoes he opened the lining and hid the gold coin which had been given him. Now comforted he made his way to some trees and curled himself up under them until there should be daylight once more.

Daylight soon came, for he was dog-tired and slept a dreamless sleep. He rose yawningly and listened for a long time to the early morning twittering of the young sparrows. Then, he felt the lining of his shoe to assure himself of the safety of his precious piece of gold. Presently, in a very leisurely manner he started off, for he did not wish to approach the city until the busy midday hours. As he passed over a piece of high ground, in the distance the familiar grey walls

made a rim of black on the horizon, clearly marked by the great gate-towers. The sun coming up over from behind intensified the outline. It was like a city rising out of the desert, and the sight so fascinated him that for a long time he stood motionless gazing at it.

He was back again. . . .

At length he sat down and ate heartily of his supply of food which was not yet exhausted. Then, going into a vegetable-garden, he begged a drink of water from an old man who was working over some cabbages and raising water by winding up buckets from a shallow well. From him he learnt that it had been quite quiet in this district for many days. There had been no soldiers or marauders.

"It is said, however, that the foreign devils are coming," concluded the old man. "Although victories are reported against them it is said that they continue to advance. It is even said that they are determined to enter the capital. Where do you go?"

"I must enter the city," remarked the boy. "It is family affairs which force me to travel. Otherwise I would run far and hide."

The old man shook his head and bent down again over his cabbages.

"Some run in one direction and some in another," he declared in a rambling way. "But I being old stay to meet my fate. As for the city who can tell. The Sword Society has been wholly suppressed, it is said; yet our soldiery are every whit as bad."

They talked in this strain for many minutes only mentioning the outward and visible things in the manner of people who labour; and presently the boy tramped away down the dusty road.

He wondered whether there was any firing now; he wondered whether he would find things in the foreign quarter as he had left them. He had been gone only fourteen days — it would be fourteen days exactly when night fell.

It seemed to be quite peaceful. Not a sound from big guns. Once, as he thought of it, a great chill struck into his heart. Supposing the resistance had been overcome. . . . It seemed impossible. For the rumours of that would have reached everywhere with lightning speed; the old man with the cabbages would have known everything about it.

He was not very far off from the walls now — not more than three or four miles. He could see the end of one of the suburbs beyond the walls: he picked out the landmarks unerringly.

He headed for that direction.

In the afternoon he reached the suburb. He strolled into it casually trying to attach himself to some one as a protection but finding no one about. It was baking hot: there was no breeze at all. That was why some triangular banners escaped his attention, since their folds hung so limp that there was nothing of their colouring to be seen. But his eye caught the blue tents before it was too late; and he murmured *ying-pan* (a camp) to himself and lay down as if to sleep.

He crawled back for a long time until the blue tents were mixed with the landscape. Then he began walking again.

He must make another detour, bearing due north.

By nightfall he suddenly realized that he was on the long road leading to his own gateway — the gateway of his youth — the city gate round which he had so long played.

"*Ai-ya!*" he exclaimed full of emotion, thinking of how his father had died and how his life had been changed by that. Then he remembered the old soothsayer's prediction.

. . . "*Keng-tzu*, the twenty-sixth year of the emperor." It had come just as had been fore-ordained: the old man had read the signs correctly. Everything from over the water had influenced him; unaccustomed things had come his way.

The gates were closed now. He knew it was too late to attempt to enter. Now an idea entered his head, a fantastic idea but one which he was determined to execute. Without haste he left the street of his youth; cut through half-forgotten shortcuts; and at length reached the Wall where he had smuggled wine with the wine smugglers years before.

The next morning he scaled the city wall with less confidence than he used to possess, and he noticed the fact. So instead of making the perilous descent, he crept to the nearest ramp and made his way down without danger since all the guard-houses were now deserted.

He drew a deep breath. He was at last in the city again — about four miles from his destination.

In the city there was dead quiet.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IT was too early for there to be much movement in the streets; yet his expert ragamuffin eyes picked up signs which comforted him. He saw wheelbarrows full of country produce moving slowly under cover of the city wall, and there were vendors laden with empty baskets going to the markets to replenish their stocks.

He was on perfectly familiar ground. Cautiously he approached a roadway leading to one of the northern gates. It was his intention to board, if possible, one of the passenger-carts plying between the northern and southern limits of the city, and by mixing himself among city folks to mask his identity. He had already thrown away his staff the night before. Now he rolled up the blue bundle which had contained his food and dropped it. Then he took the few small silver coins he had and hid them in a crevice in the city wall, which he marked carefully so that he could one day recover his property — if he survived.

He had one small string of holed copper coins left — just enough for a purchase or two and for his fare on the passenger-cart. Now having done everything which his fertile brain could suggest he hastened on, swinging his arms carelessly.

The fact that his tongue moistened his lips continually was the only sign of excitement he disclosed. His eyes, which were blood-shot from over-exposure in the sun, betrayed nothing at all. They were alert but not over-anxious. They looked out of his strong ugly face firmly and full of resolution, as if the world were an easy place to conquer.

Half-a-mile farther on he met a tattered fellow with a small basket under his arm who was selling miserable-looking plums. He bought some more for the sake of the companionship and for the conversation which he might have than for anything else. But the man knew very little save that it was dangerous everywhere in the city, and that poverty was the only sure buckler. There had been very heavy firing the day before: the foreign devils were still alive and shooting back he asserted. He also declared that there

was a church full of them not more than a mile or so away who had had the audacity to blow up a whole camp of soldiers it, was said.

"It is more and more dangerous," grumbled the man. "As for your finding a seat in any passenger-cart, that is not to be thought of. None with money dare to move. How should carts ply for the moneyless!"

"Then I must walk," said the boy, "I go to find my relatives near the Hata gate."

He moved on — very deliberately.

A few shops of the poorer variety had now taken down their shutters. He noticed that the coffin-shops were open. But there were few people about, and even the main streets had a solemn and deserted appearance. Fortunately there were no soldiers — the plum-seller had said that they were being all drawn out of the city to meet some coming attack.

At length he passed under the shadow of the great Drum Tower which is right in the middle of the city and stands at the four cross roads. Here were soldiers. There were many of them aloft in this ancient work, standing in a line and gazing towards the south.

He hastened on, not daring to linger or to inquire what it might be.

Presently the distant monotonous detonation of rifles fell on his ear. Firing was evidently going on as usual: the foreign quarter was being besieged in the same way. Perhaps the soldiers had wind of some development and were watching for it.

It took him the best part of an hour to reach a point where in the dim distance he could see the Hata Gate. Now as he looked there was a flash, and later a long rumbling detonation which mixed with the cracking of rifles. They were firing cannon from this elevated point: that was what the soldiers on the Drum Tower were watching.

People were walking here, forced out of doors to get their daily supply of food. All wore hunted expressions, and the oldest clothes. He knew from this that the soldiers robbed those who were decently attired.

Later a hiss in the air made him start, and then a spent bullet kicked up the dust a few yards in front of him. It was getting dangerous,

yes; very dangerous as he approached the battleground of the city.

Now he kept close to the line of shops as the others were doing. But there were fewer and fewer people abroad the further south he went; and presently he saw a dense encampment of blue tents.

This must be a headquarters — there were ever so many soldiers about and camp-suttlers were coming and going with loads of food.

Quickly he went down a side street and tried to work his way round. But when he came out again on the main thoroughfare there in front of him was another encampment — this time a camp built of matting.

He ground his teeth impotently — these tortoises were everywhere. . . .

One of the soldiers came suddenly and caught him by the neck whilst he was gazing at them and forced him to carry a heavy load of kindling-wood. He undertook the task willingly as it gave him an excuse to linger. But his satisfaction was short-lived; for he had hardly set down the load when another soldier armed with a rifle

struck him brutally with the butt and told him to be off.

The blow raised in him deep hatred. With the jeers echoing in his ears long after they had ceased, he made his way sullenly down the back-streets.

It was the rage in his heart which was his undoing. For once again he came out on the main thoroughfare and stood gazing in the direction of the foreign quarter which was less than half a mile away, a half-mile of loopholed houses and hidden barricades which he was powerless to traverse. This murderous warfare had given the locality a ruined look. Weeds and grass had sprung everywhere; close to him there was a patch of rank weeds almost as tall as a man.

The monotonous cracking of rifles sounded occasionally in the distance, but the cannon on the gateway had become silent. For the morning was advancing and the first energy of the day had evaporated.

He stood there, with his back against a shuttered shop, wondering how he should manage to force his way through that half-mile. He became convinced that this was the wrong road to

take; there were too many houses and too many traps. He began moving off. But as he did so he fell in with some soldiers who were wandering listlessly about, seeking pickings in the looted shops.

They cried to him asking him what he was doing. He answered insolently that he, too, was seeking what he could; and after that they captured him. Tying his hands behind him, they struck at him until he wept; and then to humiliate him they tore off his coat and shoes.

One man took the shoes jeeringly and held them up, and said to the others that he would hurl them where they would be lost. But as he did so, his attention was attracted by something. He stopped talking; pushed his fingers in the lining of one shoe; and, after a short pause, pulled out the gold coin which had been so carefully hidden.

"Gold," he cried excitedly as he scrutinized it and rubbed it, "a piece of foreign-gold!"

They cross-examined the boy and beat him again after that, but he would confess nothing about foreigners. He said he had looted the piece of foreign money from a man who must

have stolen it. Then they took him up to their Commander, who was the commander on the great gateway with the cannon, and said that they had caught a spy; for this must surely be a spy since he could give no clear account of himself. They detailed the manner of their capture with a wealth of detail—adding details that were not true—and the Commander told them to do as they pleased with him. So they tied him there in front of their barricade, bare-headed and bare-chested, up there on the city wall, where the foreigners' bullets would surely find him, they told him, when their fire opened on the gun-position as it did every night.

The foreigners found him like that that very night when they executed their unexpected sortie in the dark against the guns that had been posted at the gateway and had annoyed them for several days. By a miracle he was not bayoneted. Providence protected him to the end. He was half-carried, half-led by the sortie-party down to the foreign quarter, a great excitement filling them. For there were those who could speak to him in his own language, and they

speedily knew who he was since he talked vociferously and unendingly, telling all he had suffered. As in dream he saw his red-bearded master emerge out of the darkness and come towards him with loud exclamations and great strides. But to him he merely said respectfully: "Your Honour, I have returned; but the message the great army gave me is inside me because it was too dangerous to carry and I swallowed it, and by your blessing I shall now die a natural death."

THE END

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